TIMBER WOLVES

BERNARD CRONIN

THE LIBRARY
OF
THE UNIVERSITY
OF CALIFORNIA
LOS ANGELES

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2008 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

http://www.archive.org/details/timberwolves00cron

TIMBER WOLVES

TIMBER WOLVES

BY

BERNARD CRONIN

AUTHOR OF "THE COASTLANDERS"

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED LONDON

PR
6005
C[illegible]

DEDICATION

"TO THE MEMORY OF MY FATHER"

1453527

FOREWORD

THE characters in this book are entirely fictitious. The most that may be claimed for them is that they are true to type. Of the incidents recorded herein some few, at least, rest upon a foundation of fact.

Vice and virtue flourish alike in town and country. The aphorism that one half the world does not know how the other half lives may well find its application here. So long as men continue to gather together in odd corners of the land, so long will be found in their midst some whose presence owes itself to the fact that civilization will no longer tolerate them openly. Such men admit no ties but those of self interest; claim no kinship beyond the common origin. In the seclusion of the outback they are at liberty to revert to grossness unspeakable. For the character of Tom Login, therefore, it is felt that no apology is needed.

THE AUTHOR.

CHAPTER I

IT was on a bleak day of late winter that news of old Richard Moyes' death reached his solicitors, Messrs. Colvin and Heritage of Queen Street, Melbourne.

The city was bathed in a cold, steady rain that set the gutters awash and sprayed icily against the lowered faces of the hurrying pedestrians. From the window of his room Robert Colvin looked down on the crowd of shivering workers, smiling contentedly as he noted the comfortable contrast afforded by his own surroundings. A coal fire was burning in the grate set at a corner of the room. Under foot a thick, if well-worn carpet, gave a pleasant feeling of warmth to the feet. Across the door leading into the outer office a curtain of thick tapestry was drawn, effectively blocking any remote possibility of draught. Draught was Colvin's bugbear. In his way, he was something of a molly-coddle ; a fact amply attested by the muffler around his neck and the carpet slippers encasing his feet. In appearance Colvin was tall and thin, with overlong limbs and rounded shoulders. He was at that period of life most easily described as elderly. From behind spectacles his small twinkling eyes regarded his fellows with speculative, though not unkindly interest. His voice was smooth and even, and curiously expressionless, even in moments of excitement. Taken altogether, he presented the not uncommon picture of comfortable, easy-going, none too shrewd middle age.

Crossing to the fire Colvin bent above it for a minute, warming his hands before settling himself at his desk. This done, he placed one lean finger on the bell-push at his elbow. The door opened and a clerk entered.

" Mr. Heritage come in yet, Seton ? "

" Just come into the office, Mr. Colvin. Shall I say you wish to see him ? "

" As soon as he can conveniently manage it, please. And, by the way, bring me everything you can find in the way of papers relating to the estate of Captain Moyes. The mail

this morning brings news of his death, Seton. He died last week in some out-of-the-way corner of Queensland; up in the Gulf country, I believe. Possibly you remember the Captain? Eh?"

"I think most of us in the office would remember Captain Moyes, sir," said the clerk, with a slow smile. "A jolly, open-handed old fellow, was the Captain, in spite of his rather rough manners. I'm sorry to hear that he's gone."

"Well, well—it happens to us all," answered the solicitor rather absently. He dismissed the clerk with a little nod and taking a flat tin box from a drawer of his desk began to busy himself with the contents. Glancing at several papers he finally selected one and laid it on his desk. The rest he returned to the box, which he then immediately locked. Hardly was the operation completed than his partner entered the room. Colvin looked over the top of his glasses with a little smile of welcome.

"Well, Johnnie? So here you are at last, eh? Lord, it's cold enough in all conscience. Stir the fire, will you, and then come and sit down here. I want to have a chat with you."

The most noticeable difference between the partners was the disparity of age. Heritage was still short of thirty, a fine erect figure of a man, presenting a striking contrast to the thin, invalidish form of the senior member of the firm. In the sense of actual prepossession he was not good looking. At the same time, his features held that almost indefinable expression which denotes a charm of character altogether apart from mere facial attribute. His eyes and hair were brown; his mouth large but firm lipped; his chin square and determined looking. When he smiled, which was not unseldom, he disclosed two rows of perfect teeth. In repose his face was strong and compelling, but relieved from actual sternness by the tiny lines of jovial humour which wrinkled the corners of his eyes. For the rest, he was an ordinary clean-living, healthy-minded youngster, possessed of average intelligence and singularly free from any suspicion of snobbery.

As Heritage drew his chair up to the desk Colvin smiled again genially. "You're not looking altogether up to the mark, John, my son. If I didn't know you so well I should begin to suspect the dissipation which appears inseparable from present-day youth. Heigh-ho! how the time flies! Well, what's the matter? Fagged, eh?"

Heritage grinned. "I could do with a holiday, of course. But then so could you. So could everybody, in fact. Spending money instead of earning it, eh? The working man's dream. Seton said you wanted to see me. Anything special?"

Colvin's expression had sobered. He looked at his friend earnestly a few seconds before replying. "Johnnie, I've been having a heart to heart talk with myself. The result of my communings I pass on to you. My son, as a man and a gentleman, I find in you much to admire and love; as a lawyer, however, I have come to regard you with something approaching horror. I despair of ever seeing you take an intelligent interest in your chosen profession."

Heritage stared at him open-mouthed. "Well, I like that. What's the matter with me? What have I done now?"

"That's it. What have you done? Nothing—literally and in solid fact, nothing. Your heart's not in your work. If it were not approaching a blasphemy to suggest it, I might easily infer that you loath the study of the law because it is the law. You . . . "

"Well, so I do," admitted the younger man, relapsing once more into his cheerful grin. "I hate and detest, and abominate the law and everything connected with it. Now be fair, Bob. You said just now that it was my chosen profession, and you know it is nothing of the kind. Left to myself I should have qualified for a pirate or a bushranger, or something jolly of that sort. I took up this abominable grind just to please the poor old mater, God bless her sweet memory."

"So you did, so you did," conceded Colvin, rather hastily. "The fact is, no matter how you come by it, that you don't fit. You're the square peg in the round hole. Now, Johnny, don't get your back up. Wait till you hear what I have to suggest." He took a paper from his desk and spread it open. "You remember old Cappy Moyes, eh? Well, he's dead. I've just the barest particulars so far, but enough to go on. Remember the instructions he left with us to be carried out in the event of his dying?"

"Generally speaking, I do," said Heritage. "I'm hazy about the details though. So old Moyes is dead, is he? Now I'm sorry to hear that, Bob. There was something in that old chap that always made a strong appeal to my sentiment, supposing me to possess such a feminine attribute.

Spin the yarn, there's a good fellow. Oh, and I say, you don't mind if I light a fag. Hang office rules. What's the use of making a martyr of yourself, even if you are a dry-as-dust lawyer. Fire away!"

Colvin pursed his lips disapprovingly but made no protest. He tapped the paper in his hand. "I can't tell you anything much about Captain Moyes that you don't already know. My recollection of him goes back about ten years. You were not with me then. Moyes came into my office one day and asked me to take entire charge of his affairs? He was a rich man even at that time. Certain speculations, which I flatter myself were suggested and carried out by myself, converted him into one of the wealthiest men in this or any other state. I am not absolutely sure of the figures but from memory I should say he leaves real estate and personal effects to the value, roughly, of about £500,000."

Heritage withdrew the cigarette from his lips with a whistle of astonishment. "God bless my soul; as much as that? I always knew, of course, that he was beyond the ordinary, but I never even suspected those figures. Who inherits?"

"I have the Will in my hand. You can read it for yourself later. It's sufficient to say now that, with the exception of a few charitable bequests, the whole of the estate goes to one Peter Philip Barkley, of parts unknown but dimly suspected. Moyes was never married and it appears that he has neither kith nor kin of his own. Barkley was an old shipmate of the Captain's."

"I see. By the way, you say 'Peter Philip Barkley of parts unknown.' Does that mean that you don't know where to find him?"

Colvin made a little gesture with his hands. "It does. For all Moyes knew to the contrary, Barkley may have been dead these fifteen years or more. The two men were firm friends at one time; they appear to have been inseparable. Yet I know for a fact that they separated years ago and never met afterwards. There is a good deal of mystery attaching to the whole business, if you ask me. They separated. Moyes travelled north and Barkley south. They appear never to have made any attempt at correspondence; which, considering I have the Captain's word for it that they were as David and Jonathan, I take to be exceedingly strange. And yet reticence of a kind, especially as touching the sentimental, would be a natural trait in such characters. They were essentially men of action. Their friendship had

been cemented by the adventuring together through a score of years. Each had on occasion saved the life of his friend. How they ever consented to part is a mystery to me. Yet there was no severance of personal friendship. They simply parted. Why, God knows. No doubt their reasons were good and sufficient."

Heritage made no comment. Colvin rose jerkily from his chair and began to pace the room. His eyes held a far-away look. Even a lawyer can respect romance. Presently he checked his stride and took up a position before the fire. He looked quizzically across at his partner.

"It is an idle speculation doubtless," he remarked, in his expressionless tones, "but can you suggest a probable reason for such remarkable behaviour? I tried more than once to draw the old Captain but he refused point-blank to gratify my curiosity. I am as little curious as any man, but really" . . .

Heritage stirred sympathetically. "I know. It does set one to thinking, doesn't it? Well, if you ask me, I say some woman was at the bottom of it. The old cynical suggestion, eh? *Cherchez la femme*? God bless me, the world doesn't change in essentials, for all this latter day talk of advancement."

"I can understand that it might have been so," said Colvin. "Suppose both men to have been in love with the same woman. Nothing unusual in that, eh? Obviously she couldn't accept them both. So being firm friends they let the best man win and played the game with each other. Well, we know Moyes never married, if Barkley did. And yet I don't know. Perhaps the woman—if there was a woman—held views of the future which included neither of them. You never can tell what a woman will do."

"Supposing we can't trace Barkley?" suggested Heritage, after a moment's silence.

"In that case the hospitals benefit," said Colvin testily. He began to drum on his desk with long nervous fingers. "For the present we need not discuss the contingency. We are allowed two years in which to find Barkley—long enough, surely. Now this brings me to my point. Under instructions we begin to search for Moyes' heirs at this very minute. Someone must therefore take the matter up right away. For obvious reasons I cannot do so myself. There remains yourself. Is there any reason—private reason, I mean—why you should not give this matter your own personal attention,

make it your own particular business, as it were. Expenses, I may say, are to be charged up to the estate. That is understood, of course. Well, what do you say ? "

" Me ? "

" Why not ? " said Colvin patiently. " I should have supposed you would jump at the chance. In this matter of tracing Moyes' heirs there is contained all the elements of mystery and romance. Were I ten years younger and not addicted to catching such infernal colds I should certainly reserve the opportunity for myself. Besides, you will be quit of the office for an indefinite time. That, in itself, should be an inducement. As a lawyer you leave much to be desired. As a sleuth hound you may surpass yourself. Joking apart, will you take the thing up for us ? "

" Well, I don't know." Heritage's face betrayed his sudden interest. " It's worth thinking about. I shall have to take a course of Sherlock Holmes. The trouble with me would be that I shouldn't know where to begin. It strikes me that looking for this man Barkley will be very much like hunting the proverbial needle."

" I can help you a little there, I think," said Colvin thoughtfully. " Your haystack, supposedly containing the needle Barkley, is Tasmania. That much I learned from Moyes. In fact, I can give you the name of a definite locality in which to begin your search. The name of it is Timber Bend, and it is situated, I understand, somewhere on the North-West of the island. Ever hear of the place, Jack ? "

" Can't say I have. What sort of a place is it ? "

Colvin smiled faintly. " I believe it is a region principally devoted to cattle-raising, lumbering, skin running (whatever that may mean) and sly-grog selling. Imports, unsuspecting new chums with well lined pockets ; exports, said new chums minus anything but a consuming desire to put as many miles between themselves and that part of the coast as they possibly can. From all accounts the natives are a tough lot. Don't let me frighten you."

" Carry on," said Heritage briefly. " Any other recommendations ? "

" None that I know of. Unless you include their pleasant habit of cordially hating a stranger at first sight. At the same time, I do not think you need fear active cannibalism. The people are hardly far enough advanced for that as yet."

Heritage grinned dubiously. " Quit joshing, Bob. I

must say you make the thing attractive. I think I'll take the job on if only to disappoint you. After all, I could do with a holiday and I quite agree with you that I don't seem to be making a startling success in the office. Where did you get all this terrifying information from ? "

" I ran against Gordon Stewart at lunch one day," said Colvin. " His firm have a timber concession near The Bend, as they call it. Gordon has never been to the place himself, but he says it's quite common knowledge that some of the finest timber in the Commonwealth is to be found inland of the coast thereabouts. The big timber firms have had their eyes on the spot for a long time. Some of them are actually operating on the ground already."

" They are, are they ? By jove, I wonder now, if Mr. Frame could tell me anything about the place," exclaimed Heritage. " He's the big fellow in the timber trade, you know, Bob. I'll take a run round to his house one night soon and ask him a thing or two. As it is, you can put me down on the pay roll right away as this firm's private sleuth. I take the job."

" That's all right," assented his friend, a shade abruptly it seemed. He fidgetted a little in his chair. " Go ahead and see Sam Frame all you want to, if it pleases you. Only see here, my son, keep your business to yourself. I'm not—well to put it bluntly, as between friends, I don't love Frame over much. I'd sooner run blind, as the saying is, on this matter."

Heritage protested. " Hang it, Bob, I've known Frame since I was so high. Winifred Frame and I went to the same school. Sam Frame may be something of a hard character but I think he's straight. Come now."

" I know, I know," said Colvin pacifically. " Only in matters of business, you know, it's best to be on the safe side. In a thing of this sort there is ample room for imposture. We can't be too careful."

Heritage looked at him curiously. " I know you don't like the Frames, especially the old man. Why is that ? What have you got against him, anyhow ? "

" That's just it—I haven't anything against him ; nothing definite, that is." The accuracy of his own admission gave Colvin an absurd feeling of annoyance. While it was true he did *not* like Sam Frame, it was likewise undeniably true that he could point to no concrete illustration in justification of his animus. It was simply that he felt Frame was

wrong somewhere. Behind the almost aggressive friendliness of the big timber man Colvin had more than once thought to sense an indefinable spirit of hostility, as if Frame secretly sneered at the gullibility of those who took him at his face value. To the elderly lawyer, versed as he was in the psychology of his fellows, it had seemed too that Frame, for all his robust composure, had upon his mind something in the nature of a burden, some echo of past history that explained the nervous pucker of his heavily lidded eyes, the almost hunted expression of his square jowled face. Colvin thought of these things but he did not utter them aloud. Instead, he brought the conversation back to the matter in hand.

"Let me see—this is July. Suppose you made a start about the first of the month. That gives you plenty of time to formulate your plan of campaign and attend to any little private matters which may be on your hands. I'll have Seton set to work to draw up a précis of Moyes' instructions. He can also make arrangements for your expenses. Since you may be away for six months you had better open an account at the Bank nearest to Timber Bend. Other details can be arranged as they present themselves. What do you say?"

"Suit me all right," said Heritage, his momentary huff forgotten. "Do you know, the more I consider this trip the more the notion appeals to me. Well, I'll get along to Frame's as soon as I can. If the old man knows anything of the place he'll tell me without any fuss. And, since you ask it, I'll be mum over the real reason for my trip. All the same, I think you are slightly unreasonable, Bob."

Colvin settled himself at his desk without further comment. He thought he understood perfectly the attitude of the younger man towards the Frames, father and daughter. He had more than a suspicion that Heritage fancied himself in love with Winifred Frame. Colvin might have found it in his heart to condone this fact if it were not for his distrust of the girl's father. He knew Frame to be intensely proud of his daughter. The timber man's ambitions would certainly fail to include a young and impecunious lawyer, however otherwise estimable. Yet Colvin knew that it is the privilege of youth to be optimistic beyond all reason.

Heritage himself was, at times, sadly puzzled as to his real feelings towards Winifred Frame. He was conscious of an odd feeling of restraint whenever he thought of her, a condition which annoyed him intensely because he failed

utterly to understand from whence it arose. It was as if some sixth sense were calling a halt to the promptings of his youth and inexperience ; some hitherto unsuspected intuition which warned him to distrust the seeming fairness of his eager judgment. And this the more extraordinary in view of his entirely matter-of-fact nature.

It was not till a fortnight later that he found an opportunity to visit Frame's house. He chose a Saturday afternoon for the call, knowing well enough that at such a time he must find the timber man at home. If Frame had a passion beyond his chosen business, it was for his garden. His spare time, if such a man could be said to have spare time, he occupied among his lawns and flower beds. Here it was that Heritage found him. Frame looked up hastily at the young man's greeting.

" Why, how are you, Jack ? "

Sam Frame was nearly fifty years old, though in actual appearance he might easily have passed for ten years younger.

His eyes were large and deep-set, with a curiously direct gaze. His hair, slightly flecked with grey, was coarse and bristling, cropped close to the temples. His face was square jowled, the cheekbones high and of a purple tinge by reason of the heavy growth of beard beneath. His neck was short and thick, showing at the right side a broad band of livid flesh, the scar of a wound evidently received at some period of an adventurous youth. At ordinary times this disfiguration was distinctly visible ; in moments of excitement it swelled to a conspicuousness little short of repulsive. Taken altogether Frame's features were those of a man of obstinate determination, almost vindictive will ; a man careless of his own or others feelings so he triumphed in his ambitions. Yet his voice was smooth-spoken and his eyes not unkind.

" Well, where have you been this week or so ? " he continued. " Too busy to come and see your friends occasionally eh ? Win was saying at breakfast this morning that you seemed to have deserted us altogether."

" I have been busy, Mr. Frame," said Heritage, shaking the big man's hand. " As a matter of fact, I've just dropped in to say good-bye for a week or two. I'm taking a run across to Tasmania in about a week's time. I may be away a week or six months. I can't say yet with any certainty."

There was a barely perceptible pause before Frame replied.

" Tasmania, eh ? And what takes you over there ? Holiday making, I suppose. I don't know how you young men manage to combine business with pleasure in the way you do. I never could get the knack of it myself. So you're tired of lawyering, is that it ? and mean to have a fling away from the office ? "

" It's just a matter of business," said Heritage, flushing a little. He wanted to tell the old man the reason for his trip but his promise to Colvin forbade it. Frame was eyeing him a trifle expectantly, he thought.

" Well, well—just business, eh ? " said the timber man good-naturedly. " You do quite right to keep the matter to yourself. There, it's all right. I'm not offended in the least. The essence of business is privacy. Tut . . no need to make excuses, man. Come along to the house and have a look at the new panelling I've just put in the hall-way. Every splinter of it is seasoned myrtle. So far there ain't a sign of borers anywhere."

Frame's devotion to the timber trade was almost fanatical. He never wearied descanting on the superiority of the home-grown article as opposed to imported timbers. It was his pride that every stick contained in his own home was Australian born. He seldom lost an opportunity to proclaim the fact. He mounted his hobby now.

" Look at that flooring, Jack. Nothing the matter with that, eh ? I got that Jarrah sent over from the West in the log and had it sawn on my own benches. Show me the Baltic Pine that can stand alongside of that. Been down a dozen years, and I'll give a pound for every warp or buckle you can find. I tell you that one day the folks in this country will wake up to the fact that we can grow timbers ahead of anything the old world can show."

" Of course we can," agreed Heritage sympathetically. He had heard all this many times before, yet the repetition never bored him. While not holding such decided views as did the timber magnate, he yet understood enough of the value of Australasian timbers to enable him to take a decided interest in the matter. " Of course, Mr. Frame, that is so. But, you know, a prophet is without honour in his own country. You say people won't listen to you when you try to point out just what an asset this country has in her forests. Well, what else can you expect. We have the imported mania pretty badly just now. Whether it's a State Governor or a tin of jam we don't think we're getting our due unless we fetch

them from overseas. It's all part of the snobbery of Free Trade."

Frame gave him a quick glance from his heavily lidded eyes. "That's it. But where is the sense of the thing? I tell you it nearly drives me wild when I consider the folly of our present administration. Look at those mantles. Anything wrong with the graining? Any rot? Any warp? Don't they look well? Ain't they solid enough? And what are they, anyway? Imported woods? Maple or mahogany maybe? No, sir. They're just plain ordinary old stringy-bark, or messmate, as some call it, from Australian hill country. It gives me a pain in the head to hear the way some of the local fools talk. To hear them you'd think our timbers rotted in a week. I'd like to shove some of these little Australians in coffins made of Australian three-ply, and let them take their chance of busting out. They'd be there till the crack of doom, and six months after that. Let me tell you that you don't need to look outside of this country for any quality of timber you like to name."

They stayed a minute in the hall to admire Frame's new panelling. It was of polished red myrtle, every grain smooth and sound as a bell. "That come from Tasmania," said Frame. "I'm still a bit doubtful of its value outdoors; I ain't certain it will stand the weather. But put it in under cover and there ain't its equal for wear and finish. And yet there are plenty of men in the trade that try to make out that myrtle hasn't any market value. Bosh!"

"Don't they use myrtle for tramway rails?" asked Heritage.

"In some parts, yes. The wood grinds as hard as iron after a time. I was talking of joinery though. No, we can suit all comers. Take that match making firm that set up in business here a year or two ago. Didn't see how they were going to keep up the supply of Norway pine for their matches. Reckoned we had nothing over here that could be worked easy enough. Well, what wood are they using for their matches now? I'll tell you. Their substitute is Queensland hoop pine, and I ain't heard any complaints yet."

"One day others must think as you do, Mr. Frame," said the young man, as they entered the dining-room. "Once our Forestry Department organises sufficiently to stop the waste of raw material that is going on all over Australia, and insists on a right value being placed on the home-grown article, then I fancy we shall be on the road to success. Get

practical men into the Administration; that's the first, step."

Frame smiled grimly. "When that time comes (about the millenium, I should say) you'll find me waiting on the doorstep. I'm keen on the attitude I've taken up, but I don't try to make myself believe I'm anything of a philanthropist. I'm out for business. And when they start looking round for the timber they can't do without, it's going to be Sam Frame they'll have to come and ask it of." He broke off abruptly. "Hallo, here's Win! Blest if she ain't been to sleep in her chair. Lazy little puss. Her e Chicken, wake up and shake hands with Jack. He's crossing to Tasmania in a day or so and wants to say good-bye."

"Tasmania? Whatever are you going there for, Jack?" From the depths of her big, comfortable chair the girl thrust out a hand, yawning lazily. "So that's why we haven't seen anything of you for such a time. You've been plotting to escape from your friends. Sit down, sir, and tell me all about it."

At sight of her, coiled languorously before him, yawning daintily between ripe lips that showed a vivid red against the pearly whiteness of her small, even teeth, Heritage's heart began to race absurdly. As always in her presence, the restraint which held his more sober senses in check, began to yield almost immediately to the subtle charm of her femininity. He bent eagerly towards her, a little bewildered by the nearness of her softly heaving bosom, the perfume of her billowy hair; sensing vaguely the faint sensuousness that seems to emanate from a woman barely awakened. Her eyes sought and found the homage in his. Through lowered lids she peeped at him, smiling a little, well pleased.

"Well, sir? Aren't you going to ask how I am? How horribly rude you are to-day."

Heritage drew back in sudden embarrassment. "I'm sorry, Win. Well, and how are you? Hardly any need to ask, after all. You're looking splendid. No, there's really nothing to tell you. I'm just making an ordinary business trip to Tasmania. The details would only bore you."

She made a little mouth at him. "Oh, business? How I hate that word. And, pray sir, what is this business?"

Heritage stirred uncomfortably. It was one thing to evade the friendly interrogation of Sam Frame, but quite another to deny consolation to the pretty curiosity of his daughter. He mentally anathematised Colvin's absurd

caution, labelling it mean and inexcusable. The girl, her eyes searching his face, seemed to divine his dilemma instantly

"Oh, it's a secret. I can tell from your face that it's a secret. You're frowning horribly. Jack, I adore secrets. Do tell me. I promise faithfully not to mention it to a soul."

He shook his head, smiling faintly. "Honest, Win, it's nothing of any interest. I'm sure I would tell you with pleasure, only you see I . . . that is, Colvin made me promise not to talk shop."

A shade of ill-humour came on the girl's face. "I hate that old Colvin of yours. Surely you can tell your friends a little of what you are doing, without him making a fuss about it. As if it was any of his business what you did. Do tell me, Jack. There's a dear?"

To Heritage's infinite relief Frame came suddenly to his rescue. "Don't tease the boy, Win. He's quite right. At the same time, there can be no harm in asking what part of Tasmania he is going to. No objection to that? eh Jack?"

Heritage was glad to modify his refusal. "Certainly not, sir. I wish I could tell you everything. As a matter of fact, my objective is a place called Timber Bend, on the north-west coast of the island. You don't know it, I suppose?"

Frame gave a little exclamation of pleasure. "Why, don't I? Timber Bend, eh? Why, I've got leasehold over there. I've had a mill down on the Bend for two years past. At the same time, I've never actually set foot in the place, though I hope to pay a visit there very shortly. By the way, you can get me a little information while you are there, if you will."

"Anything I can do, Mr. Frame, just mention it. Just whereabouts is Timber Bend? I've been wanting to ask ever since I came. I had the idea all along that you would know." Heritage was glad to see that Win's momentary irritation had passed. She smiled at him as she reached a slender hand to her father's arm. "Ever been to Tasmania, Win?"

"No. But Dad has promised to take me one day. I'm sure I shall be horribly sea sick."

Frame laughed as he patted her hand. "Not you, Puss. Now look here, Jack, I've a map of north-west Tasmania somewhere or other. That will tell you all you want to know. I think it's in my desk here. Yes, by jove."

"Now you see how it is," he continued, spreading the map on the table between them. "Burnie's your port. From there you take rail as far as Malowa. The rest of the way you must coach it. And that's no great hardship, they tell me. You'll find the finest coach service in Australasia running on that route. From Malowa to The Bend must be all of seventy miles. You won't see very much on the way along because the roads hug the coast most of the way. The shaded parts on the map represent timbered country. The rest is mostly plain land, especially on the coast. Most of it is V.D.L. holding, though some of it is Crown Lease for winter cattle runs."

Heritage studied the map with interest. While he did so, Win rose from her chair and joined them at the table, looking down between the heads of the men, a hand on the shoulder of each. The attitude of proprietorship, no less than the nearness of her presence, the caress of her breath against his cheek, thrilled Heritage pleasantly. As before he experienced a slight sense of bewilderment.

"I see. Thanks, Mr. Frame. This gives me a very fair idea of the lay of the country. By the way, you said something about getting you some information while I am over there. Just what is it that I can do for you."

Frame bit the end off a cigar. "I'll tell you." He hesitated a second, looking at his daughter. "Win, suppose you run along to your room and try on some of those dresses you screwed out of me last week. I've a bit of business to talk over with Jack."

She made a little face at him. "I suppose I'll have to. I think you're both horridly mean though. Why can't I stay and listen? I'm not a child."

"You wouldn't be interested, anyhow," said her father, a bit sharply. "There—run along, Puss. Jack is staying to dinner so you'll have a chance later to talk all the gossip you wish."

As she went out of the room Frame turned to the younger man with a short laugh. "She don't like me keeping a thing from her; but what else would you do. Trust a woman with your life, if you feel like it, but don't ask her to keep a secret."

He spread the map afresh across the table, resting a thick forefinger on the site of his timber concession. He looked at Heritage with peculiar directness. "Of course, what I'm going to say ain't for the newspapers. I can trust you where

I can't trust another. You're not in the timber trade. It don't matter to you one way or the other. I've most generally found that a man's actions are ruled by interest alone. And so they ought. Well, what about it ? "

Heritage hastened to reassure him. " Oh, I shan't talk, Mr. Frame. At the same time, if it's anything you'd rather keep to yourself . . . ."

The big man made a gesture of impatience. " I just said I wanted to tell you. Know anything of the timber market ? No ; I can see you don't. Well, now listen to me. As you know, we've got plenty timber in the Commonwealth, if it could be got on the market when it was wanted. The trouble just now is that the particular kind of timber required in the building trade ain't coming forward as quickly and as easily as it might. You and I know why that is. The stuff's being allowed to waste wholesale. It's all harvesting and little or no planting. The forests are thinning out. In a year or two there will be hardly a stick of accessible timber left. In certain quarters you can hear talk of re-aforestation —now, when it's too late. Let them talk. All the timber they can plant from this on won't affect the market in my lifetime, and that's the only time I care to worry about."

As he warmed to his subject Frame's face lost its look of heavy good nature. He stood squarely erect, his whole poise aggressive, his eyes glinting curiously. His cigar had gone out. Absently he tossed it through the open window to the path outside.

" Some timbers are more valuable than others. Any fool knows that. Take blackwood, for instance. Putting aside its value for decorative fittings, it's a wood the coopers can't do without. The barrel trade must have it. If I told you how many blackwood staves were used every year by the big breweries you'd be astonished. Do you know what the ruling price for staves landed on the wharf in Melbourne is ? It's from 48/6 and upwards per hundred. Yet I can buy them at the stump for 10/6. Reckon those prices up for yourself."

" Who gets the money ? " Heritage ventured.

Frame grunted. " We do. At least, we think we do. I've had my share so far and can't growl. At the same time, I want more. And I think I see my way to getting it."

" The margin seems wide enough to allow you a whacking big profit," commented Heritage. " Still, here's a point I

don't get. Why don't the breweries take up their own leases ? "

" Because they ain't awake. Pretty soon it'll be too late. Let me tell you something that ain't generally known. There's a stave combine forming to handle the entire stave market of the Commonwealth. We're going to supply the breweries with all the staves they want—a million a month, if they can take them. They'll buy from the Combine or they won't buy at all. Most of the blackwood area is in our hands now. We thought, at one time, we had it all ; not long ago news reached us that some of the sugar was still on the wrong side of the pot. It's here that you can help me. If there's timber country untouched around Timber Bend I want to know it. I believe there is, and so does Garraway, my manager over there. I want to make sure, and I want to do it in such a way that folks outside the regular trade ain't going to notice what's doing. It's an ordinary business precaution. Otherwise I'd have the outsiders pricking their ears in a way that mightn't suit. For one of our own men to start nosing around would be to look for trouble. But you they wouldn't suspect. It's quite a small matter I'm asking, but I'm willing to make it worth your while. Will you do it ? "

There seemed no reason why Heritage should hesitate over a decision, yet it is certain that he did. He said finally : " Why, yes, Mr. Frame, I could manage that for you, I think. It's little enough to do, anyway. Somehow though I wish you hadn't told me about your plans."

Frame looked at him. " Why on earth not ? "

" Oh, I don't know. The thought just came to me that I shouldn't like it to happen that you came to regret your confidence. Things have such a queer way of turning out. I hate anything in the nature of business between friends."

" Ain't thinking of starting up as a rival in the trade, are you ? " asked the timber man, half jokingly. " Well, go right ahead. We ain't afraid."

Heritage coloured. " Good Lord, Mr. Frame, you know I never meant to suggest anything of the kind. I've cheek enough for some things, but hardly as much as all that. Of course you were joking."

" Naturally," said Frame carelessly. " Don't worry about it." He fell into meditative silence. He resumed after a while, " All the same, you know, there are plenty of men would get to windwards of me in this matter, if they

could. The timber trade is like any other trade. You got to get in first and then hold on in the face of all hell. The rights of it? I reckon that don't trouble Sam Frame. I take an even chance with the rest, and what I get I keep. If any other man is strong enough to put me out of the running he's welcome to do it. As far as that goes, there's been one or two already that have tried to poach on my preserves. They got stung for their trouble." He slammed the table with his hand. "I tell you, Jack, the man that thinks he can butt into my game and get away with it ain't right in his head. By God! I'd squeeze him out of business if it cost me every penny I've got."

Heritage looked up in astonishment. Frame's voice had become suddenly harsh and even menacing. His face was flushed, his eyes twinkled malignantly. Above the low edge of his collar the scar on his neck showed in livid relief. A certain grossness seemed to have taken the place of his former carefully held attitude of restraint. Heritage was suddenly conscious of a queer feeling of dislike and suspicion.

Something of this must have shown itself in his face for the timber man checked his outburst almost immediately. Leaning over the table he once more referred to the map spread between them. "As I told you, these shaded parts represent timber areas. Most of them are already taken up, as you see. This marking in red ink I put in myself. It outlines the position of a blackwood swamp we took up last year."

"Is this an official map?" Heritage asked him.

Frame appeared to hesitate. "It is and it isn't. It's an exact tracing of the latest Government survey map. A friend of mine at Hobart got it for me. He wouldn't like it to be known though. They'd probably kick up a shindy in the department if they heard about it."

Frame had made a quick return to his genial manner, but his laugh still grated a little. Heritage stirred uncomfortably at the sound of it. In all the years he had known Frame he had never, until this evening, encountered this side of the old man's character. He began to realize that he knew very little of Frame after all, and what he did know was purely of a social nature. From a business point of view the big timber man was an utter stranger. The discovery affected Heritage unpleasantly. He began to wonder what kind of an antagonist Frame would make. Half forgotten tales of Frame's lack of sentiment, his utter disregard of principle—

tales aforetime dismissed contemptuously as the spiteful belittling, the interested discrediting, of jealous trade rivals—came back to his mind. There were stories too, he remembered, of Frame's domestic affairs. There was also a good deal of mystery about his antecedents. Where had he come from originally? Why was it that he never mentioned his wife's name? Who had she been? and what were the circumstances of her death? Hitherto Heritage had always refused to listen to what he considered the idle scandal which pursues every public character. Yet now even his fancied loyalty to Winifred Frame could not blind the suspicion which crept into his mind. On Frame's own admission his business dealings were queer, to say the least of it.

"So you see that my information is about as exact as you can get," continued the timber man. "I got two of these maps. One of them—this one, you can take away with you. I'd like you to mark off on it roughly just whereabouts you think there's any unoccupied timber country to be found. That's all I want you to do. The rest will be up to me. How about it?"

The question was asked carelessly, but there was no mistaking the swift anxious glance which Frame shot unnoticed at the younger man. Heritage repeated his former assurance. Under the circumstances he could hardly do less.

"I'll do what I can, Mr. Frame. I'm no bushman though, so I'm hardly likely to discover land which has been overlooked by your own men, let alone the folks who live in the district. I wish you had chosen someone else though. I've all the will in the world to serve you, but I'm doubtful of my ability. By the way, do you hold the only concession on Timber Bend?"

"I believe so." Almost immediately Frame qualified the statement. "At least, I don't know of any others. Unless, of course, you count Stewarts; but their holding is really south of the Bend proper." He looked across at Heritage with an air of relief. "So that's settled. I'm really obliged to you, Jack. You won't mention anything of this outside, naturally."

"Certainly not," replied Heritage, a little stiffly. Now that he was committed he was feeling dissatisfied with the whole undertaking. Of a sudden his view point had changed. His glimpse of Frame the business man (the real Frame, as he told himself) brief though it had been, was almost a revelation. The old-time boyish homage which he had enter-

tained for the big, bluff timber merchant yielded mysteriously to the deliberate summing up of one grown man towards another. The result was disappointment and a vague uneasiness.

It was in this mood that he met Winifred Frame at the dinner-table. And here again his new view-point intruded itself. True, his pulses quickened at sight of her beyond the gleaming napery and polished appointments of the table between them, but much of the old-time fascination was lacking. For the first time in his life Heritage found himself viewing the girl critically, and was amazed at the doubts which assailed him. It seemed as if Win sensed a little of what was passing through his mind, for her lips pouted childishly and her eyes, meeting his, held a vague challenge.

Throughout the meal Frame conversed pleasantly enough. He spoke principally of his own business, and Heritage became instantly impressed by the old man's undoubted grip of his subject. In spite of himself he was intensely interested; so much so that he began to ply Frame with questions. Win fidgetted in silence. Plainly the conversation was boring her. Quite suddenly she broke into remonstrances.

"Oh, bother your old timber. You're both of you neglecting me shamefully. Jack, do tell us a little about your trip. Such a mysterious young man you can be when you choose. And I'm simply dying with curiosity."

Her father shook a warning finger at her. "Now, Puss, can't you leave the boy alone? There may be reasons, you know, why he can't tell us. No doubt we'll hear all that's good for us."

Heritage looked at him gratefully. "I'd like to tell you all about it; only, you see, our business is mostly confidential. We can hardly violate a confidence. I doubt if you'd be interested in any case."

"But we are your friends," protested the girl, coaxingly. She flashed a smile at him. "We shouldn't breathe a word. And we'd be most frightfully interested—really we would. You simply can't refuse to tell us a little."

Heritage shook his head once more, but not quite so decidedly. "You make it hard to refuse. You see my promise to Colvin binds me. Still, I might tell you a little. My trip has to do with a late client of ours. Just the undertaking of a little commission in accordance with his instructions. I don't suppose it will amount to anything much after

all. I hardly expect to be gone more than a month or two at most."

"A *late* client? Then he's dead? How perfectly exciting. Who was he? Did we know him?"

Heritage smiled at this flood of feminine curiosity. "I don't think you ever heard of him. In his way he was a kind of a hermit, was old Dicky Moyes."

He was looking directly at her as he spoke, admiring the handsome profile of her face as she turned towards her father. He saw her half rise from her chair, and a little exclamation escaped her.

"Daddy? . . . What is the matter? Jack . . my father is ill." . . .

Frame waved them back reassuringly. "It's nothing. I . . . fancy I've been overdoing things a trifle, that's all. I . . . I shall be all right in a second. A little faint." . . .

The old man's mottled face was strangely grey. His breath was hurried and the hand he raised to his forehead trembled slightly. In genuine concern Heritage persisted. "Let me help you to a sofa, Mr. Frame. Win, will you fetch a glass of water?"

Frame made an effort to smile. "Water? Bah, do you want to poison me? There, I'm all right again. Did I frighten you? Eh, Puss?" He patted her arm clumsily. "Go ahead with your story, Jack. I'm afraid I wasn't listening. You must excuse an old man's ill-health."

Heritage had resumed his seat. He was wondering a little at the unconcern on Win's face. "That's all right, Mr. Frame. I was just saying that the name of the late client whose affairs necessitate a trip to Tasmania, was Captain Richard Moyes. You did not know him, I think?"

Frame shook his head slowly. "Who was Captain Richard Moyes? One of the big shipping company's men, I suppose?"

"He wasn't that. To be quite candid, I know very little about him. He was not what you could call a communicative kind of man. He kept his affairs to himself; especially the events of his past. I don't even know how he got his title. From what he let out I should judge that he hadn't been afloat for at least fifteen years prior to his death, which occurred about three weeks ago."

"And that is really all you know of him? How strange," remarked the girl. She patted her yellow hair into place with

one tiny jewelled hand. "Can't you tell us where he came from?"

"Neither I nor anyone else can tell you that," said Heritage gravely. "I tell you, Win, the man was an unknown quantity. He lived the life of a recluse, although he was immensely rich. About his past life he was as close as an oyster."

"Well, well, that was his affair, after all," remarked the timber man. Some quality in his voice attracted Heritage's attention. He almost thought he discerned a note of relief in the rather impatient utterance of the big man. The notion was an absurd one, but strangely enough he could not dismiss it from his mind. He was still puzzling over it when, some two hours later, he said good-bye to the Frames and wended his way back to his lodgings.

CHAPTER II

HERITAGE'S first glimpse of Tasmania was received through the swinging port-hole of his cabin. He had an impression of grey mist and tumbling water, low hills of green against the swelling background of the dawning sky, rocks that loomed sullenly beyond the fast clearing haze.

The trip across Bass Straits had been rough but uneventful. Of his fellow passengers he had seen little or nothing—and had been heartily glad of the fact. Indeed, for the greater part of the time he had been compelled to remain prostrate in his berth, the while he marvelled at the capacity of the human body—his human body, to suffer. At about midnight he fell into uneasy slumber, to be awakened in the early hours of the morning by the clattering of the winches on deck as the vessel was wound to her berth at the wharf. As Heritage lowered himself to the floor of his cabin and felt groggily around for his clothing, a steward entered with a cup of hot coffee and a dry biscuit."

" You for Burnie or Devonport, Sir ? "

" I'm not in the least particular, so long as it's good dry land," said Heritage, grinning at the man feebly. " You blessed creature, is that coffee for me ? " He sucked at it thirstily. " Yes, I'm for Burnie. Is this it ? "

" Yessir. Just made the wharf, sir. Breakfast in the saloon in twenty minutes. Shaving water, sir ? "

" Good Lord, no ! " Heritage felt gingerly at his whirling head. " As for breakfast, you can eat mine as well as your own, and be hanged to you ! I tell you what it is, steward, a nice little old profit your company makes out of passengers like me. I haven't wanted to taste food since I came aboard, and I don't think I ever want to eat again. I've a dashed good mind to tackle the purser for a refund ! "

The man grinned mechanically. He was used to the grumblings of disgruntled travellers. " Yessir. They nearly all say that on a first trip, sir. Shall I get you a cab ? "

" No . . . that is, yes. I say, steward, can you

put me on to a decent hotel in this town. You ought to know the merits of most of them."

The steward had switched off the electric light and was now unscrewing the cap of the port-hole. He looked round with a nod. "As you say, most of 'em, sir. I got a cousin works at the Court Hotel. They run their own cab. If you like I'll get word along to their driver."

"Do, there's a good chap!" said Heritage. Now that the jarring thud of the ship's propeller was stilled, and the vessel resting quietly at her berth, his discomfort was fast disappearing. The wind came freshly through the open port-hole, clearing away the stuffiness of the cabin as if by magic. All about him sounded the tumult of busy ship-board; the trampling of feet on the deck over his head; the clatter of the winches winding cargo out of the holds; the rattle of wheels on the wharf; the shouting of innumerable voices and the shrill hooting of an engine.

A little later Heritage found himself walking groggily up the wide hall of the Court Hotel. A sleepy night-clerk eyed him with surly interest as he walked up to the box office.

"Wanta room?"

Busy checking his baggage, Heritage forbore to answer immediately. The hostile stare of the clerk deepened. He snapped again: "You . . wanta room?"

"Depends on how the trains run," said Heritage, straightening himself. "I want to catch the first going to Malewa—wherever that may be. What time does it start?"

"One-thirty. Wanta room?"

Heritage could hardly restrain a smile at the parrot-like persistency of the man. "I'm sorry. Yes, I suppose I may as well take a room. I could do with a lie down. Certainly I'll take a room."

"Then you can't get one—full up to the roof," grunted the clerk triumphantly. He added with some show of resentment, "Something funny about *me*? When you laugh like that you need a blind hung in front of your face. I can see the corns on the insides of your feet."

Heritage hastened to excuse himself. "Sorry to rile you. The fact is, I'm still sea-sick. Well, how about letting me have the use of a bathroom and something to eat later on?"

"If you pay for 'em! Wanta leave your traps in the office? Cost you thruppence each."

Heritage handed in his portmanteaus and received in exchange the usual brass check. "It will be money well

spent. I've just landed from the *Oonah*. We had a rotten trip over."

"That so!" The clerk yawned openly. Diving into his pocket he brought to light an unsavoury looking briar and began to fill it. Acting on an impulse, Heritage produced his cigar case.

"Try one of these. They're rather decent. By the way, I met a cousin of yours aboard ship, I think. A steward by the name of Robinson. I came up here on his recommendation."

The clerk thawed perceptibly. "Thanks. So you know Bill, eh? Reckon he always sends them along here. Gosh! pipe-smoking gets sort of monotonous, don't it? You can't beat a good cigar!" He lit up, then ran his fingers through his untidy hair in apologetic fashion. "I say, I'm sorry I was a bit rattled at you jess now. Thought you was one of them ordinary, whiskey-stinking commercials. Hotel hogs, I call 'em. Come in and jolly a chap as if they owned the whole joke. Gets on your nerves when you've been out of your bed all night. They're a breed of their own, them sort! Forget my grouch."

"Don't mention it," said Heritage cheerfully. "Where did you say that bathroom is?"

The night clerk sucked gratefully at his cigar, removing it finally to blow a thick cloud of smoke ceilingwards. He reached out his hand and selected a key from a number on the wall at his elbow.

"First floor, second door on the left—number 46. And see here, Mister, I reckon I made a mistake jess now when I said we were full up. My memory ain't always the same. If you feel like a lie down, this other key shows you how. Number 54 along the corridor on the same side. Bed ain't made up, but there's enough of a mattress to let you spread yourself. And you don't have to pay."

"Well, that's certainly good of you. I can find a use for that mattress all right." Heritage was secretly congratulating himself on the successful results of his diplomacy. He took the keys and started upstairs. "I'm much obliged."

"Forget it," called the clerk after him, turning immediately to glare at a fresh arrival in the lobby. His raucous inquiry floated up to Heritage's ears.

"Morning you. Wanta room?"

After breakfast Heritage wandered outside into the streets. He had yet some hours to while away before his train left.

In the meantime he was anxious to gain his first impression of things. The sky, which had been slightly overcast at daybreak, was rapidly clearing. In full daylight the little town showed even more of charm than he had suspected. From where he was standing the ground sloped fairly steeply towards the foreshore, so that the whole prospect lay, as it were, at his feet. And it was one of quaint charm.

Over the clustering roofs immediately before him peeped the tremulous blue of the ocean. On either hand green hills closed around, in parts sweeping down to the very lip of the sea. Here and there the hills were capped by fringes of olive green foliage where the wind-swept tea tree hugged the rising ground. Between the roofs of the houses little clusters of trees seemed to spring upwards to meet the warm sunshine. With each passing breath of wind a slow ripple of colour stirred the glistening leaves. A tang of salt was in the air, clean and invigorating.

Heritage sauntered slowly along till he found himself on the wharves. The *Oonah* had already sailed for her next port of call. Far down the coast a smudge of grey smoke marked her course. On the railway pier men were unloading bags of potatoes into well-built stacks. A light engine, with seemingly purposeless energy, darted here and there to the accompaniment of shrill whistling. The driver, a little paunchy man clad in greasy overalls, called a " Good-morning " as he rattled past.

The scene, though fairly familiar to Heritage, was in some respects novel. Several things attracted his attention as being patently Tasmanian. There was, for instance, a peculiarly built vehicle called a float, used for light carting to and from the wharf. The axle was very low and the wheels seemingly out of proportion. Yet the immense advantage such a vehicle might afford in loading and unloading as against the higher-built, high-sided carts in use on the mainland, was instantly obvious. Heritage wondered why floats were not in evidence on the other side of the Straits.

Another monopoly appeared to be a kind of rough woollen overcoat which some of the men were wearing. It was an awkwardly built, absurd-looking garment, reaching scarcely below the level of the knees, and having thick cuffs and wide spreading collar. He was to learn later that the ' Bluey,' as it was called, has no rival in point of the resistance it offers against the cold rains and biting winds of the north-west winter. On a first acquaintance, however, Heritage

smiled somewhat superciliously; picturing to himself the amusement of his friends were he suddenly to appear among them clad in such a shapeless, cumbersome garment.

Towards noon Heritage returned to his hotel. Almost his own man again he attacked his dinner with such gusto as to render the freckled-faced waitress almost speechless with admiration of his powers as a trencherman. Afterwards he went down to the hotel office to claim his baggage. His friend the night clerk was no longer in evidence, having gone to retrieve his lost sleep. Heritage put a couple more cigars in an envelope and left them for him in charge of latest authority.

The engine was already coupled to his train when he reached the station. He had barely time to throw his traps into the van and climb aboard before they were off. With a carriage to himself he was able to view the prospect on either side without interruption. For the first part of the journey the line hugged the coast; so closely in places that the smiling blue waves almost lapped the ends of the sleepers. Within a few yards of the carriage window the waters of the bay danced and sparkled in the ripening sunshine. In the far distance fluttered the dim sails of various small fishing craft, and beyond these the faintly discernible outline of the hills bordering the further shores of the bay itself.

Presently the line left the coast and curved inland over the level bed of a wide valley. The country began to open out in one grand sweep of hill and vale which rose steadily upwards to meet a snow-capped range of mountains that hung magnificently against the steel-blue screen of the horizon. At Malewa Heritage left the train and joined the waiting coach for Selby. It was dark by the time they reached their destination. Utterly fagged after the unaccustomed journey Heritage was glad to tumble into bed at the first hotel they came to. He slept like a log until roused by the hotel 'boots' in the early hours of the morning, in time to catch the on-going coach for Green Valley.

This time he secured a seat on the box alongside the driver, a lean, weather-scarred, taciturn personage, alternately smoking and spitting. The flat roof of the coach was piled high with all kinds of luggage. Inside were three or four commercials, an old farmer, and a young woman carrying a child. The commercials, after the manner of their kind, were already stretching a rug preparatory to the inevitable

game of cards. The reek of their cigars was at once apparent. Heritage leaned back contentedly in his seat, listening drowsily to the steady, rythmical beat of cantering hoofs as the heavy coach swung smartly along the metal road. A touch of frost was in the air. The light breeze was fresh and salt-laden. As the morning advanced the low scrub-crowned hills which kept pace with the winding road became tremulous with light and shade. Birds twittered from the shelter of the bushes. Everywhere the purple shadows of night began to yield to the grey charm of morning. The whole countryside sprang into vivid relief.

For a couple of hours the journey proceeded without interruption, saving a pause of a few minutes while the horses were changed at a wayside stable. Then, quite suddenly, the monotony was broken. Over the crest of a low ridge flanking the road ahead there appeared the solitary figure of a running man, lumbering heavily towards them across the uneven ground. At sight of the coach he began to gesticulate violently. Even at that distance Heritage could see that he was a man of immense avoirdupois. His distress was easily apparent. It seemed as if he would collapse at any moment.

Scarcely had Heritage time to note these details than two more runners shot suddenly to the skyline, hesitated the fraction of a minute, then sighting their quarry afresh came on with shouts of unmistakable hostility. The stout fugitive heard and, with a little bleat of fear, precipitated his bulk downwards over the edge of the cutting, striking the roadway almost beneath the wheels of the now smartly checked coach. He was up again instantly and clawing his way up and over the swingle-bars to the vacant seat beside Heritage, where he subsided wordlessly. The whole incident came about with such startling suddenness that the man was settled beside him almost before Heritage had time to realise what was happening.

The driver was trying to steady the horses. A stream of oaths escaped his lips. From within the body of the coach arose a chorus of questioning voices. The foremost pursuer had leaped down the cutting at about the exact moment the stout fugitive landed on the box seat of the coach. He clutched wildly at the escaping coat-tails, missed, and aimed a furious blow upwards. It landed mistakenly upon the tender part of Heritage's fore-arm, which he had thrown out instinctively to maintain the precarious balance of the escaping man. Stung by the pain and almost before he

realized what he was doing, Heritage lashed out in return. The blow took his unknown assailant squarely in the face. He fell from the wheel into the roadway with a startled oath. At the same time, the driver released his hold of the horses and the coach bounded forward in a smother of dust.

As the shouting of the pursuers died away in the distance the stout intruder removed the felt hat from his head and began to mop at the perspiration streaming down his ample face.

"Well, by gum!" he panted.

To Heritage the most amazing part of the whole affair had been the utter indifference of the driver. Except to curse the horses the man had not opened his lips throughout the proceedings. He appeared to regard matters as being not at all out of the ordinary.

The stout man, somewhat recovered, was regarding Heritage with little friendly, twinkling eyes. His cheeks were fat and shining, and his upper lip sprouted an untidy moustache. His head was as bald and polished as a section of beeswax. He spoke in little jerky sentences.

"Well, by gum! That's certainly one I owe you, Mister. I thought I was a goner that time! You can count on Charley Salter any time you like. That smack you landed Jerry Summers must pretty near of bust his face into kindling wood. Whoof! . . . . jess like that it sounded. Reckon your knuckles is sore, ain't they?"

Heritage laughed a trifle ruefully. "They are a little. I'm glad to have helped you, I'm sure. I'm sorry though that I lost my temper and hit that man. I'm a stranger to this country and don't want to make enemies unnecessarily. Those men were certainly mad about something."

The stout man assented with a grin. "Mad as a bagful of snakes. By gum, I never run so hard in all my life before! You might have noticed that I ain't over and above thin. I was about played out when you first saw me. If it hadn't been for you I reckon they'd have caught me right enough. I can hear that smack of yours yet. Whoof! . . . jess like that. Lemme tell you Charley Salter's your friend."

The coach driver appeared to wake suddenly from his lethargy. "Well, maybe you ain't lucky? Someone'll be hung for you yet, Charley. What's the row about this time?"

Salter's face took on an expression of comical protest. He squirmed in his seat. "Jess a li'l misunderstanding, Jim. I give you my word it was no more than that. Gosh! some

people ain't never satisfied. I sold them Summers men some cows and . . . "

"There you are" exploded the driver. "You sold them some cows. Of course! That's just what you would do. Only I'll bet it wasn't cows they got. Goats maybe; or badgers. I know your tricks!"

"Well now, listen to him talking," said the stout man quite unoffended. "I tell you you're all wrong. I sold them cows and it was cows they got. There weren't no trick in it; only jess my bad luck. Old man Summers wanted some 'fats,' and I says yes, I got some. So I have. I ain't got any steers, but maybe I can dig up a hefty cow or two. Now I ast anyone, how was I to know that two out of three of them old hulks of cows was nigh calving?"

"Well . . . that's a h—ll of a likely story, that is." said the driver, spitting over the wheel. "Mean to say you never knew them cows was that way? You bet your sweet life you did!"

Salter conceded the point without argument. "Come to think it over, Jim, maybe you're right," he said naively. "That ain't any reason though for them Summers crowd acting like they done. Cattle-dealing's a gamble, ain't it? Like everything else. It's one man against another, with the odds even. I ain't no rook, but I got my living to make, ain't I?"

"Of course!" said the driver sarcastically. "And a d—d good fat old living it is, too. Eighteen stone of it, if there's an ounce!"

Salter chuckled. The reference to his adiposity disturbed him not at all. At sound of his merriment the coach driver snorted belligerently.

Heritage ventured a question. "What was the matter with the cows then? They were fat, weren't they?"

The stout man kindly explained. "It's this way, you see. Them beasts were wanted for beef. As I said, two out of the three was in calf. You can't always tell like that, you know. Especially when you buy them as forward stores and take the other fellow's word for it that they're empty. Well you know, you can't eat that kind of meat. It ain't healthy; besides, it's against the law to sell it. By gum! I must have got them old hulks mixed in the yards when I was drafting them out."

"So then this man Summers will have a loss on the deal?" queried Heritage, rather disgusted.

"Not him!" interjected the driver impatiently. "Trust one of his sort to keep his mouth shut where his pocket is concerned. What the eye don't see, the heart don't grieve over, as the saying is. There won't be much of that meat that ain't sold and eaten by the end of the week."

It appeared that the stout cattle-dealer's methods were open to suspicion. Heritage tried to reconcile this fact with the good-natured simplicity of the man, and found the task beyond him. Yet there was something about Salter that attracted his interest. It was impossible to mistake the friendly look in the little twinkling eyes that were turned upon him from time to time. Underlying the stout man's carelessly confessed roguery there seemed evidence of not a little staunchness and sincerity. His passion for getting the better of his fellows in the open market was simply the passion of the dealer the world over. It argued nothing beyond the bare facts themselves. It was, after all, only a side trait of what Heritage guessed instinctively to be a remarkably human character.

As he came afterwards to know, much of his summing-up of Salter was correct. The dealer belonged to the type of man who, while knowing nothing of the injunction of St. Paul, could yet be all things to all men. Show him his honesty was suspect and he would go out of his way to justify the doubt. Let him find that he was implicitly trusted and he would have died rather than betray that trust. Such men are not uncommon in the outback. They appear a curious mixture of vice and virtue, whose lives are a seeming jumble of contradictory actions, doubtless because of some inherent obstinancy in their make-up that compels them to live only to the expectations of their fellows.

On the arrival of the coach at Green Valley, Salter extended a pudgy hand in farewell.

"I got a friend hereabouts that tuckers me when I'm along this way," he said. "Gets kind of annoyed if I put up at Hennessy's hotel there. I don't like them sort of places, anyhow. They never give me enough to eat. You going any further?"

"To Timber Bend, wherever that may be," answered Heritage.

Salter gave a little grunt. "You don't say! I live out that ways myself. You'll have to ride out, unless a fifteen-mile walk is any good to you. Coach don't go any further than this. You can hire a hack from the hotel and get your

traps sent along by one of the teams. I'll wait for you along the road in the morning, if you like. Be sort of company for each other, eh? And maybe you won't be sorry to have someone to show you the road. It's got more kinks in it than a snake's backbone."

"I'll look out for you," assented Heritage, shaking hands again heartily. He watched the stout man waddle off into the dusk, then turned towards the door of the hotel. The building sprawled on the edge of the roadway, an unsightly collection of worm-eaten timbers that seemed on the very verge of collapse. Heritage, however, was in no mood to be fastidious. Provided he obtained shelter for the night, he cared little for the surroundings. As he stood hesitating at the entrance to the musty hallway a man detached himself from the group under the verandah and came towards him.

"Evening, Mister. You want to stay the night here? My name's Tom Hennessy. I run this place. I seen you getting off the coach awhile back."

"I want some supper, a bed for the night, and early breakfast, if I can have it," said Heritage.

"Sure, you can." The landlord's face crinkled in a greasy smile. "Reckon you'll be as comfortable here as in your own home. Lemme get your things inside and I'll pass the word to the missus to set you a place at table. I don't see your cases. I ain't got a sample room, anyhow, but you can spread your stuff on the verandah in the morning. We don't look for much trade hereabouts, Mister."

"My name is Heritage," volunteered the young man, shortly. He was not very much impressed by the looks of his host. "And I'm not a commercial traveller, if that's what you're driving at."

"You ain't, hey!" Hennessy seemed a bit taken aback. "Well, that's your business, I reckon. We get all sorts along here. Land buying, maybe? You've come to the right spot. There's some almighty good land around these parts, if you can only find it. You've jess nacherally struck it lucky coming to me. If any man can put you on to what you want it's Tom Hennessy. Thinking of settling down here?"

The man's curiosity appeared to be insatiable. Heritage checked his growing annoyance with difficulty. He reflected that probably no offence was meant. Such an inquisition was, after all, only to be expected. It was simply another phase of the outback, where a man's business may become

his neighbour's by right of painstaking research. Therefore he said with a smile: "I'm afraid I can't even claim to be a land buyer. I'm just having a look round the country. Where did you say my bedroom is? I'm pretty well tired out."

The landlord's genial garrulity appeared to have suddenly deserted him. By the dim light of the lamp overhead Heritage could see that the man was eyeing him with every appearance of suspicion. He said nothing however; only grunted unintelligibly as he seized the young man's portmanteau and led the way up the rickety staircase.

Descending, some ten minutes later, Heritage surprised a little knot of men in the passage below. At sight of him their low voiced mutterings ceased abruptly and they drew aside to let him pass. He was conscious of their keen scrutiny as he entered the room where his meal was set. Wisely he affected not to notice. No sooner was he seated than the group came together again and a sound of renewed whispering reached his ears.

The food was abominable. With disgust he pushed aside the plateful of greasy meat and vegetables set before him by a tired-looking woman whom he judged to be the wife of the landlord, and tried to make a meal of bread and butter. Finally he gave up the attempt in despair and went outside to try and soothe his annoyance with a cigar before turning into bed.

The night was perfect, with just enough of warmth in the clear air to hint at coming spring. Over the dimly seen edge of the far-off timber line a three-quarter moon was slowly rising, touching the hills with a silver sheen and studding the roadway with little pools of light. From somewhere at hand came the musical purr of running water; and, at intervals, the queer note of a mopoke sounded from the shadows. The night was murmurous with elfin harmony.

Presently he became aware of approaching feet. The landlord and another man came directly to where he stood. Hennessy's greeting contained all the elements of surprise.

"We been hunting all over the place to find you, Mister. It seems they's been a little mistake. I'll have to get you to move on and get lodging somewhere else. Your room was let by my missus to another man before you came. He's kind of making a fuss about things. They 'ain't nowhere else I can put you up, either."

Something told Heritage at once that the man was deliberately lying. Tired and disgruntled himself, he felt

immediate resentment and took no trouble to hide the fact. "You'd best find a place for me then" he said shortly. "You might know very well that it's out of the question to expect me to find another lodging at this hour, even if I was disposed to try, which I am not. If a mistake occurred it was your own, not mine. I don't intend to suffer by it."

"You heard me" said Hennessy belligerently. "Maybe my house ain't my own to do as I like with, eh?"

"In this case it certainly is not," retorted Heritage. "You appear to forget that hotels are for the convenience of the travelling public. I've booked my room and I mean to keep it."

"The h—ll you do?" This time it was the landlord's companion who answered. His voice was singularly coarse and aggressive. Heritage had an instant curiosity to view the speaker's face, but in that he was disappointed, as the man hung back in the shadows. For a second or two there was a conversation in a rapid undertone, then the landlord spoke again. "See here, Mister, you can't come the bluff on me like that. I got the law on my side. If it comes to that I say you've got to quit."

The situation was becoming unpleasant. At another time it is probable that Heritage might have yielded to the persistency of the man; in his present mood the apparent injustice of the request only served to bring out the stubbornness in his character. He fairly snapped his reply.

"If you want to quote the law, why don't you make sure that you understand what you are talking about. I've got you whipped in that argument before you start. The licensing laws operating here are substantially the same as in any other part of the Commonwealth. You've got to take me in whether you like it or not. I know it and you know it, for all you pretend ignorance. What's the matter with me, anyhow? Frightened you won't be paid or what is it? What's all this mystery and boggling and whispering about. Out with it, man. You don't think I'm green enough to swallow that yarn about your wife having already let my room, do you?"

"You'll have to go," repeated Hennessy doggedly. "I ain't here to argue one way or the other. When I says a thing, I means it."

"And so do I" said Heritage warmly. "Well, please yourself. If you put me out now you'll lose your license. Don't make any mistake about that."

There followed another whispered consultation. Heritage straining his ears to hear what was being said, gathered enough to decide that only the dissuasion of the landlord prevented the other man from attempting violence. As he waited tensely for what might follow, they moved off towards the hotel. Hennessy called back over his shoulder as he went: "You win this time, Mister. Make the most of it. It'll be my call next."

"Perhaps," Heritage shot back into the gloom. His voice was confident, but in reality he was more than a little perturbed at the trend of affairs. For the life of him he could not understand what it was all about. His sudden unpopularity was quite incomprehensible. What had he done? What had he said? For several minutes he pondered the matter unavailingly.

When at length he re-entered the hotel he found the place deserted except for the landlord and his wife, who were conversing in low tones across the bar counter. They eyed him furtively as he passed, but made no attempt to prevent his entry. The landlord's former companion was not in sight.

The bedroom door was without a fastening. Not altogether relishing the thought of possible intrusion, Heritage resorted to a contrivance of his schoolboy days. The room boasted a single chair, minus a seat, certainly, yet with a good serviceable frame. He pushed the back of the chair up under the door handle, jamming it hard down. Entry might be effected, but the noise of it would not fail to arouse him. When finally he went to bed it was to lie awake for some time reviewing the events of the day. Sleep came to his rescue tardily enough.

As it proved, his precautions were unnecessary. The night passed undisturbed. If his door had been tried while he lay asleep, he knew nothing of it. Everything was just as he had placed it before retiring. After vain search for a bathroom or its equivalent, Heritage descended to his breakfast. A few men were already seated at table. Except to look up as he entered the room these took no further notice of him. He ate his meal in solitary silence.

Immediately afterwards he hunted up the landlord with a view to hiring a horse on which to journey to Timber Bend. Rather to his surprise Hennessy raised no objection. When, however, he began to talk of prices Heritage understood that the landlord's actions were largely governed by his cupidity.

Even to Heritage the price asked seemed outrageously exorbitant. He said as much without more ado.

"Well, take it or leave it," said Hennessy rudely. "A quid a day ain't anything to make a song about. Grass is scarce and feed ain't hardly to be bought. This ain't a charity home," He added with a scarcely concealed sneer, "Besides, I'm taking the risk, ain't I? Some horses never come home at all."

Heritage passed the insult by as being too paltry to bother about. If he had to row with Hennessy he was determined to choose his own time and place, if that were possible. He said coolly enough:

"All right. We won't argue about it. Here's your money. Now, as I'm ready to start, perhaps you'll get someone to saddle up and bring the horse round to the door. How am I to return the animal to you?"

Hennessy snatched at the money greedily. "Oh, that? Why, when you done with him tie the reins to a stirrup and kick him in the ribs. He'll come home fast enough. What about your traps?"

"I'm told they can follow me on one of the teams. I suppose I can rely on you seeing to that?" He hated to ask any kind of a favour from the man but this was unavoidable.

The landlord grunted a sullen assent and went off to see about a horse. Heritage, meantime, took the precaution to see that nothing of a private nature was left amongst his belongings. When his horse came around he climbed into the saddle gingerly enough. He was stiff and sore from the coaching of the two previous days. With a curt nod to Hennessy he rode off to where he spied a stout figure, mounted on a stockily-built roan horse, waiting patiently in the shade of some bushes along the road ahead. Charley Salter greeted him with a genial smile.

"Well, how did they treat you? You look kind of sore about something; so you do, by gum! I reckon Hennessy tried to take you down, eh? He's kind of got the idea that all strangers are meat for his hook. And he's only one of a tough crowd.

CHAPTER III

AS well as he could Heritage explained what had happened on the preceding night. Salter listened in silence, his fat lips pursed and his eyes puckered perplexedly.

"So they tried to run you out, did they? No, I don't know what they were driving at, any more than you do. Hadn't been boozing up, had they? No? Well, it don't matter much. Mostly bluff and wind, them crowd are. D—n Hennessy and his friends, anyway. How d'you like the look of the country hereabouts?"

The question fitted well with the young man's thoughts. He had been telling himself that the scenery was of a kind he had never before encountered. In spite of the monotony of the button-grass plains stretching on either side of the track, something in the prospect attracted him immensely. They were riding across a kind of plateau dotted with ragged clumps of stunted gum and tea-tree. Coastwards the plains opened out as far as the eye could reach, a seemingly interminable vista of wind-swept scrub and fast browning grasses, stretching onwards towards the horizon, unbroken save by an occasional belt of timber or the twisting line of shining brown that marked the course of some winter creek. Back of the plains rose a wide circle of precipitous hills, fringed and patched with blotches of ragged, wind-blown bush; split across here and there by rifts and gutters that showed in ugly purple lines against the lighter background of the dead timber. No sign of habitation anywhere; only the long rampart of the hills. From the direction of the sea came a faint but steady breeze which swayed the tops of the ripening button-grass to a ripple of colour. From far away came the screaming of birds and the faint murmur of waves rolling on some hidden beach.

Salter pointed towards the big timber that reared itself upon the slopes of the hills. "Plenty of money to bemade out of that, though you mightn't think so. Thousands of acres of the finest hardwood in the world going to waste. A

h—ll of a government, ain't it, to allow that sort of thing to go on ? They say this little island owes more than her share to the Commonwealth debt, yet she's got money enough hidden in her undeveloped resources to foot the whole bill twice over. It makes me kind of sick to estimate the d—n foolishness of some people."

" Don't your government foster the timber industry then ? " asked Heritage.

The stout cattle-dealer snorted angrily. " They do not. Oh yes ! I know there's pamphlets been issued by the score, and all the rest of it. But I tell you that what trade there is is due simply to private enterprise. The government don't take any real interest in the matter at all. They talk and that's all. The opportunities that have been wasted for lack of plain commonsense are mighty near unbelievable. The time is coming when they're going to feel pretty sore with themselves. Here and there already folks are beginning to wake up to the fact that this country produces some of the finest timber in the world. The big timber firms know it and are grabbing all the country they can get their hands on."

Heritage's mind reverted to what Frame had told him. Here were the same ideas, the same complaints. To Heritage it seemed astounding that any government should neglect to develop on right lines such an undeniable asset. If any industry had need to be run on national lines surely it was the timber industry. The forests were the heritage of the people, yet they reaped no benefit therefrom. Instead, the government looked on supinely whilst private enterprise in the shape of Capital, filled its pockets.

" What do you suggest then as a remedy ? " he asked. " What would you have the government do ? "

" Do ? " The stout man spat contemptuously. "*They'll* never do anything—until it's too late. But I know what I'd do, if it were left to me. I'd lay dozens of light tramlines all through the heart of the north-west timber country, with a mill at the home end of each. I'd go a long way towards clearing the land by that means before I threw it open for selection. As things are now Crown purchase land is open for selection at from 5/- up to £1 per acre, according to the quality. The man that takes up a block with milling timber on it could easily pay for the clearing of the ground by the sale of his timber, *if* he could get it to market. Since he can't do that, except in rare instances, he sets to work and

ringbarks thousands of pounds' worth of timber, and logs up and burns as much more again. It ain't wood he's burning either; it's his own life's opportunity and that of his children that's going up into the air in smoke. Think what it would mean if the government scattered a few sawmills through the bush and connected each with a light tram. As I said before, some of the land would be pretty well cleared of heavy timber before it was thrown open for selection. Instead of £1 per acre they could get £2 per acre, or even more. It would mean just that amount more revenue to the country, and the man that took up the land would have just that much less big timber to break his heart over, and that much less clearing to do before he got a decent bottom of grass down for his cattle. As for the cost to the government I reckon the timber would pay for most of it."

"Yes, but they'd have to borrow to start with," said Heritage. "At the same time I know that governments have run into debt for purposes less apparent, let alone praiseworthy. You'd think they would grasp at any legitimate means of revenue."

"D'you know what I've seen, time and time again?" asked the stout man soberly. "I've seen logs—figured blackwood logs—worth anything from £20 and upwards apiece, rolled into kilns and burned. And d—d glad the men was to get rid of them too. What sort of a policy is that, eh? Figured logs, by gum! There's your government for you!"

"And private enterprise?"

"Grabbing all it can" said Salter gloomily. "As fast as they can get it too. This country ain't America, but they's something very like a timber trust operating on the mainland. They's a little group of men that's quietly gathering all the blackwood country into their hands. If you could get a man with pluck and money enough to fight these other parties to a finish, he'd make his fortune. But they's no one game enough to try. Don't I know it? I been looking for a man of that kind ever since I took a tumble to what was going on. I ain't found him yet, and don't believe I ever shall."

He pulled his pipe from his pocket and proceeded to fill it. His eye was hazy with reminiscence. After a while he resumed: "I could take you to a place where they's more marketable trees than they's hairs to your face. I suppose there is between two and three hundred acres of it in a bed.

The area is not a big one, but I can promise you that there ain't one tree in twenty that ain't fit for staves or milling. They's a shoulder of high ground that leads almost right up to the head of the government line from Pie Valley. Yes, and there's other beds of timber untouched as well as that—one that I know of. The timber folk know that it's there, but they don't know jess whereabouts. They ain't troubling much about it at present. You see they reckon they ain't anyone with guts enough to touch it, anyhow. They'll jess eat up the country they're handling now and then these areas I speak of will jess nacherally drop into their mouths like ripe plums. If I had the backing I'd show them."

"You mean you'd go into the business yourself?" asked Heritage. "Would it cost very much then to take up a timber lease or two and hold on till you could work them? There ought to be plenty of men willing to back you financially."

"Think so?" said the stout man dryly. "Well, I don't know that I can blame you. I did myself, at one time. As it is, outside of the ring I know of no one that would handle it as a gift. It ain't so much a matter of the lease, you see. It's a question of hanging on and fighting—fighting all the time. Maybe you could do it if you'd capital enough and were sure of a market. That's where the timber wolves have got you cornered."

"The timber wolves?"

"That's my name for them—the combine people," said Salter grimly. "Plain timber wolves; that's what they are. Now I'll give you some idea of the difficulty the outsider meets with when he thinks to take a hand in the game himself. When I found this little patch of timber I told you about, thinks I, I'll get across to the mainland and find me someone with bowels enough to give it a fly. I got into touch right away with a fellow named Blake. Maybe you know the name. I makes an appointment over the telephone, and one bright, sunny morning I blows into his office in town to talk things over. Right inside his door is a counter. On it they's a lot of samples of timber. One of 'em had a label on it which says 'Tasmanian Oak.' Thinks I, here's something I never heard of before; for I knew the wood wasn't sheoak, whatever else it was. So I takes a squint at it right then. It's stringy bark, that's what it is. Yes, Mister, this here Tasmanian Oak, as it was called, ain't more nor less than good old Tasmanian stringy bark."

" While I'm looking at it a fellow comes out of an inside room and looks me over, and says he, ' You've lost your way, Uncle. The Show Ground 's out at Flemington.' ' Let it stop there then,' I says. ' Are you Mr. Blake ? ' ' Have you any appointment ? ' says he. I says I have. He looks down his nose then, and coughs, and fetches me into a room where they's a fat, smooth-faced, oily looking gent sitting at a desk with a dead cigar sticking out of his face. He says this is Blake."

" I tells this new fellow ' good morning,' and he says the same to me. He hears what I've got to say and then he yawns and says he, ' Just whereabouts did you say this timber is located ? ' ' In Tasmania,' says I. ' You might as well say the Commonwealth of Australia ' says Blake. ' Can't you be more definite ? What part of Tasmania— North, South, East or West ? How far from a shipping port ? What area ? Got any samples with you ? If you wish to do business with me, my man, you don't need to be stupid ! ' "

" Inside of me I'm getting annoyed, but I don't show it. Maybe he don't mean any harm. ' If you take the matter up, of course I'll be wanting a share in it ' I tells him. ' Time enough to give you the exact location when they's an agreement signed.' ' You don't trust me ? ' he says, getting a bit red in the face. ' You think you won't get a fair deal, is that it ? I'd have you to know that the name of Blake & Co. stands for absolute business integrity.' "

" I holds up the sample of Tasmanian ' Oak ' that I've forgot to put back on the counter. ' What do you call this ? ' I asts him. He looks at me for a minute as if he thinks I'm off my bean, and then he grunts ' Can't you read ? It says Tasmanian Oak, don't it ? ' ' Then it says what ain't true,' says I. ' This here is jess plain ordinary old stringy bark. You know it, and I know it. As a timber it's second to none. So far as that goes, it takes almost an expert to tell it alongside of English Oak when it's been seasoned properly. That ain't the point. It's got a name of its own, and they's no need to miscall it. You ast me jess now if I didn't trust you. Well, here's my answer, right in my hand. If you'll deceive the public about a bit of wood you'll think nothing of deceiving me over a bit of a verbal promise. It's your turn to speak.' "

" ' It's a trade name,' says Blake, puffing out his cheeks like a bull-frog out of water. ' It sounds much better than

to call it by its right name and who the devil's any the worse over it, anyhow? There's no better timber in Australia.' 'That's so' I says. 'It's the nearest approach to the truth that I've heard you speak. All the same, you know mighty well that if you put it on the furniture market under its real name your sales would drop by half. Well, that would be your look-out. Educate folks to an understanding of the value of stringy bark and you'll have no need to coax them to buy. I'll admit they get their money's worth even as it is, but that ain't the point. Maybe the distinction is too fine for you to see. In the meantime, since it seems it's the fashion to invent names for things, I'm taking a fancy to calling you 'Bunkum' instead of 'Blake.'

"My gracious, didn't he get mad! 'Get out of my office!' says he. 'Wild horses couldn't hold me in it' I says. And so out I goes, with him grinding his teeth and shouting he'll queer me with every timber man in the city. And what's more, he done it."

Heritage looked at him sympathetically. "You tried again then, did you?"

"I tried dozens, but I done no good. At the last I got on to a man named Sam Frame. They tell me he's the big bug in the timber business."

The introduction of Frame's name into the conversation caused Heritage no surprise. Somehow he had been expecting it to happen. "I know Frame fairly intimately" he remarked.

Salter threw him a doubtful glance. "You do, eh? Then I'm bound to say you know a pretty rum character. Oh, yes! I know they's nothing actually against his record; nothing visible as you might say. But for all that the man's a wrong 'un. I feel it in my bones. They's been things happen right here on the coast that were damnable. On the surface they wasn't a trace of Frame showing, but underneath they was always a little undercurrent of circumstance that led you right up to his front door and left you there wondering. That man don't mean to come into the open while he can get his dirty work done for him. When Frame shows up plainly in a deal (if he ever does) it'll be because he can't help himself, because things are going almighty badly against him and he's got to cut in on the game himself. It's gospel truth I'm telling you. One day, maybe, you'll find out for yourself!"

Heritage found his mind in momentary confusion. He

wanted to take up the cudgels on Frame's behalf, but somehow the right words were lacking. He took refuge in generalities.

"Possibly! At the same time, it doesn't do to base a conclusion on a half-truth. What I mean is that unless we quite understand the circumstances of a transaction we can hardly judge of it's fairness or otherwise. Same Frame is a sharp business man, but I hardly think he would descend to downright roguery."

"I hope I ain't offended you," said the stout man slowly. "I was forgetting that you was a friend of Frame, maybe. Well, that's as may be. But I tell you it's one thing to meet a man socially and quite another to run against him in a business deal. You're meeting two different men really. What is your sharp business man, anyhow? Ain't he a man that's out to 'do' his fellows any way he can, so long as he keeps the right side of the law? They's things done every day in business that would make a Chinaman blush! They's no moral distinction that I can see, between a pickpocket and the big merchant that is known as being sharp. They both go through your clothes, but the methods is different. One robs you straight out, facing an open risk and not shirking the consequences; the other takes you down under cover of an invoice! The first man goes to gaol; the second goes to church!"

Remembering the stout man's own apparent lack of business principle in the matter of the cows sold to Jerry Summers, Heritage could hardly restrain a smile. It seemed that Salter instantly divined his thoughts for he addressed Heritage again with almost disconcerting directness:

"You're thinking about them old hulks of cows I jess sold to the Summers boys. That's right enough; but the things ain't the same. We're both on the same level. It's their wits against mine. The man I bought them cows from took me in over them. I ain't going to lose by it. I can't afford to lose by it. Them cows was a kind of a bad debt, so I passed it along to the next man who happened to be Summers. He thought he was getting a cheap bargain and took the risk of getting what he did get. But he done it with his eyes open. Remember that! Now, with men like Sam Frame it's quite different. They don't prey on their own kind, but on the man lower down. They don't want anyone else to live. They get the poor man and they get him good. And they do it when he ain't looking."

"But all business men are not like that," said Heritage rather amazed at the bitterness of Salter's tones. "Such men as you quote are few and far between surely. One bad egg, you know, will discredit a whole custard. I'm afraid you're a bit of a pessimist. The crook business man is in a decided minority."

"It ain't reasonable to doubt it, but I do," said the stout man obstinately. "I've had a fair experience and I ought to know a little of what I'm talking about. There was this man Frame, now."

"What did he do to you?" Heritage was not at all resentful. Instead, he was merely curious. "What have you got your knife into Frame for?"

"He done his best to suck my brains; meaning to throw me away when he'd finished, like I was a bit of orange peel. He ast me out to his house and shook my hand like I was his long lost brother. I told him pretty much what I'd told the others. How I knew where they was a bed of good timber untouched, and jess where I wanted to come in. But I hung tight to the only real asset that I had—the exact location of my timber patch. I told him it was in The Bend country, but no more. And I had him interested too. When I left it was with his promise to send a man over to report. I was to meet him and pilot him round; but first they was to be a bit of an agreement sent me safeguarding my own interests. I left that house walking on the tips of my toes like I was a ballet dancer that had got a straight tip for supper from the front stalls. Well, I come back home and I waited and waited, and they weren't no word. So then I wrote. Oh yes, I got a reply all right. Frame had sort of changed his mind. He thought they was nothing doing at present. And I kind of thought so too, when I'd finished reading his letter."

"Nothing very wrong about a man changing his mind," Heritage commented, as the stout man paused to wipe the perspiration from his cheeks.

"You don't understand" said Salter patiently. "When I seen Frame he soft-sawdered me that much that I got to thinking he was the man I'd been looking for—the honest man with money to spare for a good speculation. I got to telling him things I hadn't ought. How they was mighty little chance of getting timber away from the Bend unless he squared Garraway, the manager of the saw-mill on the Bat River, and the agents at Pie Valley; how they wouldn't

give a poor man a chance ; how they'd got together a bunch of the worst toughs this side of the water for mill hands and bushwhackers, men who would stop at nothing so long as they was drawing good pay. And Frame laughed and said he wasn't afraid of any of them. He sort of reckoned, he said, that we could put it over on the best they could show up. And I believed him. Lord ! how he must have laughed in his sleeve. Why, Frame *runs* Garraway. It's Frame's saw-mill. Garraway's only manager. And the agents at the valley are all drawing commission from Frame himself. I found all this out for myself long afterwards. Frame was jess sucking my fool brains for what they was worth.

For a while Heritage rode on in thoughtful silence. The stout cattle dealer's indictment of Frame caused him no little uneasiness. He began to get an inkling of the real reason of the commission which the timber man had persuaded him to undertake. Obviously Frame had suspected nothing of the existence of this little bed of alienable timber land, till Salter had told him. Obvious also was his unwillingness to share with the stout discoverer. Frame wanted it all for himself. Somehow he expected Heritage to discover the whereabouts of this timber and so enable him to jockey Salter aside. But by what means this was to be accomplished he could not then determine. Salter would naturally keep his information to himself. That he, a stranger in the land, should be expected to duplicate the discovery of this experienced bushman, familiar with the country from his boyhood up, struck Heritage as being absurd.

" Is there a limit to the extent of timber country that can be leased to one person, or firm ? " he asked presently.

" I ain't sure, but I think they let you go to two thousand acres. They want quick royalties, see. The more the leases are divided up the more work will be done. That's how it appears to me. With one man holding a very big area it would mean jess holding up revenue. That's the theory of the thing. In practice you find all sorts of conditions."

" That's what I was going to suggest. If there is a limit to the area of any one lease how do you account for the big areas held by a man like Frame, say ? "

" There's ways and ways. Did you never hear of ' dummying ' ? These timber wolves go the limit in their own names and put up dummy agents to cover the rest. It's illegal, but what does that matter. They's no one ever

asts questions so long as the rental and royalties and so on are paid regularly. The whole system is rotten to the core. Here's these rich firms making money and more money, and denying us little fellows the right to even get a fair price for the timber on our own ground. We got to take the price they offer us, or let the timber rot. They ought to be some way out of it. I've thought and thought till my head aches. I'd give ten years of my life to be able to get ahead of this crowd and hold up timber country till I got my own price for it. If there was a chance I'd even try to work it for myself."

Heritage thought he could well believe it. Timber was getting scarce, and it was odds that one holding a good lease must eventually get his own price, always supposing he could hold out long enough. Frame's map of Timber Bend, which now reposed in an inside pocket of Heritage's coat, represented the big timber man as holding an area short of a thousand acres. Yet Heritage remembered that Frame had told him he held practically all the timber country there was, with the exception of that leased by Stewarts. What then meant the presence on Frame's map of other names besides his own. They must either represent Crown purchase selections of agricultural lands of timber leasehold. If the former, Frame had forgotten to mention it ; if the latter, the timber man must have resorted to the methods described by Charley Salter. In short, Frame must have dummied.

At a bend in the track the stout man suddenly pulled up his horse.

" I fetch off here to get to my place. If you keep right ahead as you're going now, you can't very well miss The Bend. Maybe you'll stay at the ferry house ? Old Williams, the ferryman, ain't up to much, but I reckon you ain't aiming to stop long in these parts. You could put up with roughing it for a day or two I reckon."

Heritage smiled back into the twinkling eyes of the other. " I've been very glad to have your company and guidance. I don't know how long I shall be staying at Timber Bend. It will probably be a week or two at least. By the way, Mr. Salter, do you know of anyone living in these parts who owns to the name of Barkley ? To be precise, Peter Philip Barkley ? "

The stout man pondered a minute. " I can't say that I do. They used to be a man called Barker that was prospect-

ing around the head waters of the Bat River last spring. He wouldn't be the man? No, I suppose not. His name, I remember, was Bill. What's he like, this other person?"

"I've never seen him. I should say he was close on fifty years of age and that his talk smattered of the sea. He is married, and probably has a grown-up family. Beyond that I don't care to speculate."

"I don't know the name," said Salter. "You sure he ain't changed his title, eh? Many of them do, you know, when they come to these parts. There's good reasons, no doubt."

It was a contingency that had so far escaped Heritage's attention. He began to see that his task was not an easy one.

"By jove, I never thought of that. Well, all that I know at present is that Barkley came to Timber Bend many years ago. Possibly he moved on again. The man may even be dead."

Salter prepared to depart. He held out a stubby hand for the young man to shake. "I don't live more'n two or three miles from the ferry, Mr. Heritage. If you care to come across any time, my wife and daughter will be glad to see you—and no bothering about what your business might be, either. You'll find the mob at the ferry house a rum crowd. I doubt they'll be to your liking. They may treat you right or they may not. From the way Hennessy went on, I should say not. Him and the ferry folk is hand and glove and they's a telephone line between them. I'll bet you're expected. Well, if they turn you down, you go right ahead and hunt up Pete Diamond and tell him I sent you. Don't forget to say that. Charley Salter sent you." His utterance became suddenly irrelevant. "By gum! you certainly did hand it out to Jerry Summers that time. Charley Salter's your friend. Whoof! I guess like that, it sounded."

Heritage rode on slowly to the accompaniment of his own thoughts. Presently he began to look about him, the sap in his veins rising to the spell of the coastlands. He saw before him the entrance to a narrow valley. On one side rose the sombre green of the timber line, a living wall of swiftly-changing shadow, rising stiffly to the grey summit of the hills; on the other, there stretched the brown and purple of the plains, a sun-kissed vista of swelling radiance, dotted abruptly by the slow moving forms of grazing cattle and scored delicately by far off, narrow gutters of scrub-lined

swamp. Beyond showed faintly the yellow pinnacles of the rocks overlooking the wide reaches of the foreshore, and the white mist of spray sent up by the surf pounding on the ragged beaches below.

So far the journey had been uneventful enough. Now, however, Heritage's communings were interrupted in startling fashion. From the bush lining the side of the track there sounded suddenly the muffled report of a shotgun and the sharp patter of flying shot. Himself untouched, it was probable that the same immunity was not shared by his horse since the animal bolted forthwith. It was not until he had raced madly onwards for two or three hundred yards that Heritage was able to pull him up. Immediately he dismounted and tied the trembling animal to a sapling gum. Heritage was furious and not a little scared. At the same time, he was fully determined to investigate the occurrence. Rightly or wrongly he was possessed of a notion that the shot had been fired deliberately.

In cooler judgment he might have hesitated to expose himself to further risk. He argued now, however, that it was unlikely a second shot would be fired at him in like circumstances to the first. For one thing, his return would be unexpected. It was possible that he might take the author of the outrage at a consequent disadvantage. He hoped grimly that it might be so.

With the utmost caution Heritage proceeded to retrace his steps, till he found himself opposite the scene of his adventure. There was no appearance of anyone on the road or in the bushes beyond. He sought for tracks in the sandy soil of the plain, but found none beyond his own. The marks of his own horse were plainly to be seen. He was able to determine the exact spot over which he had been riding at the time the shot was fired, for here the ground showed distinctly the deep impressions of his horses' hoofs as the animal landed from its first frightened bound. Of anything else there was no sign. Everything was absolutely quiet. The bushes lining the track hung silent and motionless.

Disappointed and immensely puzzled, Heritage was about to return to his horse when there came to his alert hearing a distant murmur of voices. The sound appeared to issue from a patch of scrub on the left of the roadway. With a moment's hesitation Heritage stepped into the shadow of the bushes and began to worm his way softly through the under-

growth, pausing now and then to readjust his bearings. He was almost certain now that he could distinguish the voices of a man and a woman. In his eagerness to view the speakers he forgot his new-found caution and stepped fairly on a stem of dead wood that lay in his path. The rotten branch snapped with a report like a pistol shot. Instantaneously the sound of voices ceased. There followed a confused sound as of some heavy body forcing its way swiftly through the scrub ahead. Then, as if pointing a climax to this most amazing adventure, a woman's voice began to sing. Without more ado Heritage thrust himself forward and stumbled out clumsily enough on the edge of a tiny clearing.

The singer was directly facing him, yet it appeared his advent was unnoticed, since she continued without the slightest trace of embarrassment. Momentarily glancing beyond Heritage saw the bushes on the farther side quiver slightly as if something were passing through them. Then his eyes came back to the girl and he smiled involuntarily at the queer picture she presented to his conventional mind.

She was seated on a log, her hands spread on either side of her and her head tilted backwards in the exercise of a pleasantly soft though not very musical voice. Her dress was of the plainest ; her feet, resting carelessly on the rough timber, were encased in thick, nail-shod boots. On her head was a battered felt hat of patently masculine ownership. Over her shoulder was coiled the supple shining thong of a stock-whip, its short cane handle swaying to the movement of her body as she swayed herself from side to side to the lilt of her song.

As Heritage moved towards her the girl's voice was checked abruptly and she slid from her seat and stood watching his approach. To the young man it seemed that her composure was a trifle too obvious, under the circumstances, to be genuine. He could have sworn that her previous attitude of apparent unconsciousness of his presence was an assumed one. The idea startled him somewhat.

" Please forgive this intrusion," he said, " but it was really not intended. I am looking for—for someone, and the sound of your singing guided me here. I hope I have not frightened you at all."

She was silent a minute, studying his face. When she answered it was with a correctness of speech and accent which surprised him.

"No, you did not frighten me. Fortunately my nerves are in good order. I am not very easily—frightened."

"I believe that" said Heritage, beginning to feel rather uncomfortable. His preconceived notions were tumbling about his ears. His imagination had always pictured the out-back girl as extraordinarily crude and timid, harsh of speech and abrupt almost to the point of rudeness. Heaven alone knew to what freakish literature or unreal experience he owed the conception. He told himself that this girl of the bush was both refined and sensible.

Now that he was able to look at her closely Heritage could see that his first impression of extreme youth was mistaken. She was older than he had thought—perhaps twenty-five or thirty. In spite of her freckled skin and rather wide mouth, set with firm white teeth, her face was attractive. Her eyes were dark blue and intensely practical, yet with more than a hint of humour underlying their seriousness. From beneath the wide brim of her hat showed little clusters of tawny hair.

"I believe that," he repeated. "I . . . you don't happen to have seen anybody else around here, I suppose? A . . a man with a . . shot-gun, for instance?"

"Why do you ask that?" she said.

Heritage felt his indignation returning. He answered with unnecessary vigour. "Why? . . because someone kindly tried his best to murder me as I rode past here a few minutes ago. A shot was fired at me from the bushes beside the track. Fortunately the aim was bad, or perhaps I should not be here to complain about it. Naturally I desire an explanation, if I can get it."

He thought her eyes widened a little; otherwise her expression did not change.

"Fired at you? Are you certain? Isn't that rather a serious charge to bring against anyone? Why should anyone fire at you?"

Heritage shrugged his shoulders. "It's true, anyhow. I think you must know that it's true. You couldn't help hearing the noise of the shot." He added impulsively, "Even if you did not actually see it fired."

The girl made a little motion with her hands. It seemed to him that the suspicion of a smile flickered over her face.

"Aren't you taking a lot for granted? It's too absurd to suppose that you wish to hold me responsible for what occurred. I assure you I have had nothing whatever to do

with any attempt to shoot at anyone. And, as you can see, I am quite alone—and unarmed."

Her frankness completely disarmed him. He began to blunder into an apology. "I beg your pardon. Such a thought never entered my mind. If I overstated my case it was because I gave way to a natural irritation. It seemed incredible to me that what has happened could have escaped your notice. What would you advise me to do?"

She appeared to hesitate before answering. "I wonder if you would listen if I gave it you. Somehow I don't think you would. Yet I should mean it for the best."

Heritage smiled. "I am sure of that. Supposing you try me. I never felt more in need of sound advice than I do at this moment."

"I will then. If I were in your place I should do nothing. I'll go further than that. I should return to wherever it was I came from and forget that such a place as Timber Bend existed. Now I've startled you. Well, I've answered honestly. I can't do more than that."

To say that Heritage was startled was putting it mildly. As a matter of actual fact he was wondering if he had heard aright, so utterly unexpected were the words. For several seconds he could only stare at the girl uncomprehendingly. Yet there was no doubting the seriousness of her eyes and the sober inflexion of her lowered tones. Amazingly it appeared that she was in deadly earnest.

"But why should I?" he cried, when at last his voice returned to him. "What have I to fear? What do you know of me that such advice should be necessary? Until a few minutes ago you never even heard of me. . . . is it not so? Yet now you seem to imply that I stand in danger of . . . what? Why shouldn't I remain in this neighbourhood? Is it any fault of mine that someone takes a pot shot at me? And, if it comes to that, why at *me*? What have I done?"

She shook her head slowly. "Still, the shot was fired, wasn't it? At least, you tell me so. There must have been some reason. Unless, of course, the whole thing was an accident."

"It was certainly not that," said Heritage curtly. He felt that the situation was fast becoming impossible, even farcical. Were it not that his commonsense reassured him, he might easily have supposed himself transported backwards to the early twenties of the past century.

The serious look in her eyes deepened. "Isn't that an additional argument then, to prove the soundness of my advice? After all, I can only offer a suggestion. It is for you to decide whether it was necessary or not. In any case, don't you think you had better go from here?"

Heritage flushed. "Since I am obviously *de trop*, I suppose I had better. All the same, I intend searching those bushes at your back before I leave. I may be wrong, but the idea occurs that they may not be as innocent as they appear. The gentleman—if it is a gentleman—who has proved himself so careless in the use of fire-arms, could hardly select a better place in which to shelter himself from possible retaliation. If you will kindly move aside I should like to begin my search."

His words had an unlooked-for result. For the first time the composure of this strange girl seemed in danger of deserting her. Her face went white and her eyes widened like those of a terrified child. She put her hand on his arm.

"No . . . I beg of you . . . don't do that. You don't know what you are doing. Oh, believe me I was in absolute earnest when I told you to go from here. I can't add to what I've said. For your own sake you must not attempt to search those bushes. Can't you understand?"

She met his look steadily. With a shrug of the shoulders Heritage turned away. After all, what did it matter whether he carried out his threat or not. The morning was already far advanced and he had still some distance to go before his journey was ended. Under the circumstances it seemed hardly worth while wasting any further time over the incident.

"I can't say that I do understand. To me the happening of the past half-hour is simply incomprehensible. I suppose, in a way, I ought to feel obliged to you for the interest on my behalf which your words seem to imply. I should feel much more satisfied however, if I knew what it was all about. Of course, I don't intend to discontinue my visit to Timber Bend. I shall proceed precisely as if this morning's incident had not happened. But, since you insist, I shall deny myself the immediate prospect of discovering the identity of the gentleman with the gun. I make no promises regarding the future, however."

The girl gave a sigh of relief. There was a touch of sadness in her voice. "I'm sorry you feel so much resentment. I suppose it is only natural, after all. I can understand that

duty comes hardly sometimes. Still, you owe yourself a certain amount of consideration." She hesitated a minute. "Don't you think you had better go now?"

There seemed nothing else in decency that he could do. He raised his hat and started to move away, but halted again at a sudden thought. "I don't even know who you are. And what a boor you must think me. I'm really very much obliged to you. I don't understand, but I know there must be something you fear for me. I'm sorry I can't take your advice and return home. I'm going right ahead with the business that brought me here."

He turned away again, only to halt a second time. "I don't know your name?"

He saw her teeth flash in a smile as she called back to him. "But then I don't know yours, do I? That makes the honours even, don't you think?"

Finding no answer ready at hand with which to combat this essentially feminine logic, Heritage continued his way in baffled silence. His horse was standing quietly where he had tied it. He climbed into the saddle and sent the animal forward at a smart canter, anxious to make up for the time his adventure had cost him.

In bewildered fashion his mind ran back over the events of the past two days, and could make nothing of them. These North-West Tasmanians were an extraordinary people, surely? They had the knack of taking a stranger absolutely by surprise. There was, for example, the hurried appearance upon the scene of Salter, the stout cattle dealer. Then the swift antagonism of Hennessy, the hotel keeper at Green Valley; an occurrence which apparently owed itself to something beyond Heritage's powers of elucidation, since he could make neither head nor tail of it. Finally, the episode of the shooting, and his introduction to this most amazing girl of the clearing.

He recalled the tone of her voice, the almost wistful look in her eyes. He went over their conversation almost word for word, seeking for the hidden meaning in what she had said, but found himself quickly at a stand-still. The only thing he was in any way sure of was that he had received no direct answer to any one of his questions. At this Heritage frowned a little. He tried to study out the meaning of it all, as one might study some abstruse problem. The net result was to entangle his understanding still further. From first to last this girl had kept him guessing. She had evaded his ques-

tions deliberately. For some reason she had chosen to pretend an ignorance of what had occurred. All she had done was to hint absurdly at some unknown danger which threatened him, a danger to be escaped only by flight. And she had said something about his duty coming hardly—whatever she might mean by that. For a moment Heritage was inclined to think that the girl had been playing with him ; trying out his courage, as it might be. However, he dismissed the thought instantly. The girl's face, fine and open and generous, precluded any such possibility. Her sincerity, her staunch womanliness, was unmistakable.

It was now close to mid-day. The early part of the morning had been almost uncomfortably warm, but now a slight breeze sprung up from the direction of the coast, bringing comfort in its train. A couple of miles from the scene of the shooting, the track abruptly ran off the plains and dipped into a thickly timbered valley, where it widened to a broad, comfortable roadway. Seeing this, Heritage decided that he was within measureable distance of his journey's end.

His surmise proved correct. Presently his ears caught the sound of running water, the timber fell away on either side of him to form an immense open space carpeted with silver grass and thinly-sprinkled rushes, and the gleam of the river beyond showed itself suddenly. There sprang into sight a confused jumble of outbuildings and yards, and the grey drab roofs of the ferry house. With a feeling of thankfulness Heritage dug his heels into the ribs of his horse and rode swiftly across the intervening space.

CHAPTER IV

THE ferry buildings on the Bat River were made up of an unsightly, ramshackle collection of weatherboard huts, having roofs of paling and shingle and chimneys of corrugated iron. The main building, which lay about two chains distant from the bank of the river, proved to be a long, weather-beaten structure whose worm-eaten timbers testified abundantly to the deteriorating influence of time. The place was redolent of decay. Here and there portions of the outside walls had commenced to bulge outwards and had been hurriedly propped with lengths of timber; palings had fallen from the roofs and been replaced by flattened-out kerosene tins, now black with rust. A wide verandah, propped by tottering posts, ran the full length of the building. The floor was of tamped clay. Here and there the windows boasted whole panes of glass, but for the most part the appertures were covered by sheets of brown paper and lengths of rag and hessian. The whole building looked gloomy and uninviting in the extreme.

The immediate surroundings were on a par with the ferry house itself. There was no garden; nothing to relieve the bare squalor save only a narrow fringe of ragged honeysuckle bush marking one boundary of the untidy drying ground at the back. The ground between the out-houses was littered with rubbish. On a rail of the fence were spread a number of rotting sheep skins, the odour from which vied with the musty stench from the adjacent yards. A few horses grazed over the paddock beyond. Of any other stock there was no sign.

At this stage of his journey Heritage was becoming familiar with the architectural vagaries of the region he had invaded. He had indeed begun to wonder just how closely a dwelling might be typical of the occupants. So far he had found a remarkable uniformity in this respect. As he rode up he was greeted with a chorus of angry yelping from a number of nondescript curs tied to different posts of the building.

Presently he became aware that the little group of men idling in front of the main entrance was eyeing his approach intently. He headed directly towards them, being minded to discover as soon as possible what manner of folk he would be dealing with. It struck him as ominous that not a man of them returned his greeting. Determined to make the best of the situation, Heritage put a question briskly as he swung himself out of the saddle.

"Is this Timber Bend?"

For a full minute there was no response. Then a stockily built man, with greasy black hair and pale, china-blue eyes, who had been sprawled on the grass, rose lazily to his feet and stretched himself with a loud yawn. His contortions at an end he shot back a single syllable.

"Yes."

"Thanks," said Heritage sarcastically. These people were beginning to get on his nerves in a way he had not thought possible. He glanced around at the other men. Their gaze had not shifted from his face. If anything, their hostile attitude had deepened.

Heritage tied the reins to a stirrup, crossed these latter over the saddle and gave his mount a gentle cut with the switch he held in his hand. The animal set off instantly at a steady trot in the direction of its home, as Hennessy had assured him it would. Heritage would have liked to buy the beast a good feed of chaff and oats before turning it loose, but appearances indicated that he was going to have about all he could do to feed himself. The people of Timber Bend might improve on a better acquaintance, but he very much doubted it. Relieved of the responsibility of his horse, and having thus burnt his boats behind him, as it were, Heritage turned again to the silent group about him, anxious to come to a quick understanding of what their surly welcome might mean. It appeared to him that once again he was meeting with the same incomprehensible air of mystery, the same sullen watchfulness, the same hardly veiled distrust that had seemed to dodge his footsteps since entering the Bend country.

Heritage singled out the greasy-haired man and spoke directly at him. "My name is Heritage. I've come to stop at Timber Bend for a week or two. Just how long it will prove I don't know. In the meantime, I naturally want to get to know folks and be as friendly as they'll let me Now, what I'm asking myself, and you, is can I get board

and lodging at the Ferry House here. I'm told the ferryman's name is Williams. I'd like to have a word with him. Is he here ? "

This time the man answered without hesitation. His furtive looks had changed to a belligerent stare. " No, he ain't. He's out round the pot poles on the coast, getting crays—if you want to know. You asts can you put up at the ferry. Well then, no you can't. And if anybody wants to know why you can tell them because Gus Rebner said so. See what I mean ? "

" I should be pretty dense if I didn't," said Heritage good-humouredly enough considering the circumstances. " You're Gus Rebner, I suppose ? "

The man leered in assent. " You've heard of me ? If you havn't, you soon will ! "

Heritage bit his lip. " Oh, yes ; I've heard of you. One particular they evidently missed telling me. I didn't know you were in charge here. I was told to ask for Mr. Williams. Is he no longer ferryman. Or perhaps you're taking it on yourself to answer for him ? Is that it ? "

" You can put it that way, Mister, if you like " said Rebner, with a careless grunt. " I told you already that Daddy Williams was down on the coast. When he's away I carry on. And what I says, has to go. See ? "

The man's harsh voice seemed to stir a chord of unpleasant memory in Heritage's mind. He could have sworn to having met Rebner before ; but under what circumstances he could not for the life of him remember. A little puzzled as to his next move, he let his eyes rove abstractedly over the ground at his feet. Almost instantly he stiffened with a queer suspicion. On the grass where Rebner had been lying was a breech-loading gun.

Of itself the fact signified nothing. Taken in conjunction with the flash of low cunning which he surprised on Rebner's face, it stood for quite a lot. Heritage guessed instinctively that he was now viewing both the man and the weapon concerned in the outrage of the morning. The fact was, of course, impossible of direct proof, but Heritage felt that such was not necessary. He was as well able to put two and two together and make four of them as any man. He had not the slightest shadow of doubt that it was Rebner who had fired the shot at him. For what purpose he had yet to discover. The whole thing was inexplicable.

The thought that this greasy-looking scoundrel could claim

acquaintance with the girl of the clearing, affected Heritage unpleasantly. It seemed impossible that such a girl should wish to shield Rebner from the consequences following what she must know to be a deliberate attempt to injure, if not kill, an innocent, unoffending stranger. Yet there was no denying that she had done so. Why? What was the relationship between these two? In heaven's name, what did it all mean?

Finding no answer in his own mind Heritage attempted to read something from the face of the man before him. Here, too, he failed. Rebner was not to be caught off his guard a second time. His unwholesome features expressed no other emotion than a kind of sneering dislike. Heritage felt his own temper rising in response.

"Look here, supposing you tell me what the trouble is? That's a fair suggestion, isn't it? I suppose even in this part of the world ordinary civility obtains as a general rule. Why cut me out of it? Until a few minutes ago you never set eyes on me. Now when I come with a simple request, asked as decently as I know how, you turn me down cold. Why? Do you treat all strangers like this? Or are you getting me in this thing all wrong? What's the matter with me? Think I'm going to bite some of you?"

It was the same bewildered protest that he had launched at Hennessy and, later, to the girl in the clearing. As then, it brought forth the same unsatisfying, perplexing rejoinder.

"I ain't arguing about it, Mister. You take my advice and get right back where you come from. The climate ain't healthy for some folks hereabouts."

Rebner picked up his gun and moved off towards the house. Like sheep the other men followed. Heritage was left standing alone, feeling unutterably foolish and angered. He called defiantly after the retreating figures:

"Well, perhaps you don't object to telling me where I can find a man called Pete Diamond, then?"

The last man to vanish inside the ferry house re-appeared suddenly. He came to the rail of the verandah and called hurriedly in an uneasy voice:

"You're some sort of a fool, ain't you Mister, shouting that name at the top of your lungs? You want Pete Diamond? Well, maybe you know your own business best but I sort of think I'd leave Pete alone if I was you. He ain't your sort."

"I'll risk that" said Heritage grimly. He was thinking

that his reception by Pete Diamond, whoever he might prove to be, could scarcely show less evidence of good-will than the greetings he had so far encountered. Besides, he had faith in Charley Salter's assurance of friendship. The stout man had told him to ask for this man Diamond.

"Oh, all right." The man made a little gesture with his hands, as if washing them of any responsibility in the matter. "Cross the river where the punt lays and keep right ahead along the track. You'll find Pete camped alongside a spring about a quarter of a mile on. Now that it's close up to feeding time, you'll likely find him home. And, Mister, talk sort of gentle. If Pete says to get, you get. I'm just giving you a hint."

The fellow seemed well meaning enough. Probably he had not altogether approved of Rebner's attitude and took this opportunity of showing it. Heritage nodded his thanks and set off in the direction indicated. A cattle drive led him down to the edge of the river, where the punt lay moored against the landing-stage. Here he stood, debating how he was to get to the other side of the water. Obviously he could not handle the punt himself, since he saw no means of returning it to its present position.

By this time Heritage was beginning to feel uncomfortably hungry and thirsty. The latter disability was soon remedied, since he had the river at his feet. Regarding the other matter he was inclined to be pessimistic. He could only tighten his belt and trust to luck. It seemed absurd that he could find no one hospitable enough to offer him a meal, especially as he could pay for all he wanted just then in the way of food. And to the worry of his inner man was added the problem of how to transport himself across the river.

He was ready to despair when his eye caught sight of an ingenious arrangement of ropes and pulleys fixed to the head of the ferry cable, and latter a thick wire rope stretching across the five chains or so of intervening water. A small dingey bobbed astern of the punt itself. From the bow of the dingey there ran a light line to the pulleys overhead. Stepping into the boat Heritage proceeded to investigate. He found that the line followed the cable across the river, and was apparently so rigged that the dingey could be rowed across and afterwards returned to its original position by the simple process of hauling on the line. It was evident the contrivance was only a calm water one. With anything

of a sea on the pull of the water must inevitably wreck the whole affair.

Heritage determined to profit by his discovery. He unshipped the oars of the dingey and cast off from the punt. A couple of good strokes sent him well free of the landing. To his relief he saw the line paying out steadily as he went. The sweep of the water took his little craft a trifle out of the straight line, but he managed to get across without any mishap, although at one time it appeared that he must foul a huge floating branch. He found on arrival that allowance had been made for the set of the current, the landing being built several yards seaward of the staging on the home bank. His hardest work came when he began to wind the dingey back to its original position. The line was threaded through a pulley to the drum of a windlass. By the time Heritage had finished winding on the handle the perspiration was pouring from him and his hands were chafed and sore. After a few minutes rest he set off again along a narrow track that shot off at right angles from the river.

On either hand the tea-tree and honeysuckle scrub closed thickly around. In places there appeared little open glades whereon the white daintiness of thousands of coast daisies sprinkled the sward like snow fallen upon a mantle of green velvet. A few currant bushes already boasted a spray or two of flower ; and, on the crest of a knoll, Heritage paused a moment to admire the royal purple of the pig-face bloom. The wind freshened as he came clear of the bushes. The hammering of the sea upon the beaches close at hand, came to his ears in one long continuous roll of sound, relieved only by the faint screaming of the water fowl that flew scavenging along the sands. A sharp turn of the track brought Heritage suddenly in full view of a couple of tents set cunningly within a half circle of the scrub, away from the drive of the sea wind. A fire smouldered against a stump in the foreground. A pace or two to the side of this a man bent over a kangaroo dog which lay on its side in the grass.

Heritage could have sworn that his approach had been unnoticed ; yet, on the instant it seemed, the man swung round to face him. At the same time the dog struggled to its feet with a low menacing growl. And so for a moment the three stood.

In after days Heritage was to remember keenly this his first sight of Pete Diamond, to remember it with a manly emotion that brought unashamed tears to his eyes. Now,

however, he was thinking that he had never seen a more perfect specimen of clean cut, magnificient strength than presented by this man. Pete Diamond was clothed simply in shirt and riding breeches, his arms bare to the elbows and his legs encased in well worn leather puttees. There was a hint of tremendous strength in the set of his limbs, a suggestion of almost cat-like agility in the poise of his body. His head was bare, showing a mass of thick black hair brushed carelessly back from a wide sun-tanned forehead. His nostrils were wide; his chin square set and deep, the chin of a born fighter.

These things Heritage noted almost sub-consciously. His whole attention was drawn to the man's eyes—wonderful eyes, jet black, keen, masterful. They held his own in a long stare of almost mesmeric intensity. He tried to break his gaze away, but could not. An absurd feeling of helplessness took possession of him. He might have been a frightened child in the reproving presence of its teacher.

Possibly something of Heritage's distress showed itself on his face, for the other man's almost fierce expression relaxed to one of careless unconcern. He turned his back deliberately and laid one big hand soothingly on the clean, shining back of the still growling dog. The animal quietened instantly. In a queer hobbling fashion it thrust itself against the man's knees, looking up at him with eager, watchful eyes.

So far not a word had passed. It seemed to Heritage now that the man was waiting for him to speak. Involuntarily his tongue loosened itself to ask a question which he knew somehow to be unnecessary.

"Are you Pete Diamond?"

The other man answered at once, though without turning. "That's my name." He added to the dog, which had shown signs of renewed anger at the sound of Heritage's voice, "Quiet, Pup! Quiet, old boy! They ain't nobody going to hurt us."

The careless indifference of his tones made Heritage flush uncomfortably. Conscious of his own physical inferiority compared to the magnificent animal strength of this black-haired giant, he did not wonder at the almost contemptuous neglect of his presence now shown by both man and dog. They indeed could have nothing to fear from him. He spoke again, but less confidently.

"My name is Heritage. I'm sorry to bother you, but I

was told to look you up if I found myself in difficulties. That is exactly the present position."

A second time he was forced to run the gauntlet of those piercing black eyes.

"Who told you that?"

"A man named Charley Salter. He said you were a friend of his. I rode with him from Green Valley this morning."

This time Pete Diamond did not turn away. He stepped forward with outstretched hand.

"Charley Salter, eh? Why didn't you say you was a friend of his at first? I reckon that'll do me. How'd you come to know old Charley?"

Vastly relieved Heritage grasped the huge fist of the other. "We met yesterday down the coast. I was fortunate enough to render Mr. Salter a slight service, and in return he told me that if I had trouble with the people at the ferry I was to go to you and say he had sent me. I'm very glad I took his advice."

"So Daddy Williams crowd gave you some sauce did they?" asked Pete, with the flicker of a smile. "I can see they riled you somehow. Forget it. They ain't no more than a lousey mob at any time. I'm going to have a snack in a minute or two. If you ain't eat I'll be glad of company. We can talk afterwards. I'll jess go ahead fixing Pup's feet. He's kind of took the skin off of them running over burnt country."

He turned to the kangaroo dog, forcing it gently down on it's side in the grass. Heritage was now able to understand the reason for the animal's queer, hobbling movement. The pads of its feet were raw and bleeding. It whimpered gently as Pete wiped away the blood and dirt caked between its toes. More than once it tried to lick his hand.

Pete bathed the feet with water from a tin on the fire. Then he greased the pads well with ointment and bound them lightly around with strips of sacking. Throughout the whole process he was as gentle and deft fingered as a girl. He kept up a continual murmur of soothing talk to the wincing animal. His love for the handsome beast was plain to see. No less evident was the dumb worship of the soft eyes that searched continually the face of the labouring man.

"There, I reckon if you ain't more easy feeling, Pup, you ought to be." Pete cleaned his hands and lifted a hissing billy from the fire. From one of the tents he brought a

lump of cold boiled bacon, some bread, and a tin of jam. These he set on the ground at their feet and bade Heritage help himself.

"You look kind of peckish," he said observantly. "Well, go right ahead and fill up. It's rough tucker maybe, but they's plenty of it and it's good. I reckon you won't hurt if you never get worse."

Hurt? Notwithstanding a horror of picnic fare Heritage told himself that never in his life had he tasted anything more appetising than this impromptu meal in the open. He ate like a horse, washing the food down with two cups of steaming hot tea from the billy. Afterwards he helped clean up and stow the things away in the box cupboard used for a safe.

It was not till Pete had his pipe fairly going that he turned to Heritage with a friendly intimation that he was ready to renew their conversation. In the curiously abrupt manner which Heritage afterwards understood was typical of him, he demanded the name of his new acquaintance.

"Heritage. I thought I told you before."

"I mean your christian name," said the big man. "On the coast here it's most generally Sam, and Tom, and Bill, as the case may be. We ain't much use for family names except for signing receipts and such like. It's a way we have to cut a man's name down to bedrock, as the saying is."

"I see," said Heritage. "Well, my other name is Jack."

"Right! They's more than a few Jacks on the coast already, but that ain't any fault of yours. I kind of like the name, anyway. I had a little shaver of a brother was called Jack. He was coming on into a big fine man when a dropping limb hit him one day. I reckon I ain't forgot how fond we was of each other. And now he's nothing more than jess a memory. Ever notice how they's a kind of value sticking to the name of anyone you like real well? You think all them with that name must be good sorts. Of course it ain't so. Only you like to think that ways at the start and give them the chance, as you might say."

He drew heavily at the pipe held between his strong teeth, sending out great clouds of smoke into the warm air. For a moment or two he kept silent. When next he spoke his voice had lost its softened note.

"You'll notice I ain't ast your business along the coast here. Me and Pup here thought at first that maybe you wasn't friendly. They's folks in these parts would see me stiff to-morrow and not bat an eye over it. I don't say I

was expecting a call from any of them, but I've learnt never to take chances. When you said you was from Charley Salter I knew you was all right. Maybe you'd like to talk ? "

It was a direct invitation to speak openly. Recognising it as such Heritage hastened to respond. As briefly as he could he sketched his trip down the coast after leaving the railway at Malewa. Pete Diamond listened in thoughtful silence. Not till Heritage touched on his meeting with the girl in the clearing did he interrupt. Then he looked up with a little chuckle.

" Reckon I could place that girl without any trouble. Did you notice if she was any kind of a looker ? "

" She was not what I should call pretty, if that's what you mean " said Heritage, hesitating slightly. " At the same time, she was far from plain. The attractiveness of her face seemed to lie in its expression rather than the features themselves. Evidently she has a wonderful character. I should say she possesses an unusual amount of moral and physical courage. Her friendship would be something to cherish. If I had had a sister I should have liked her face to reflect just such characteristics as this girl's face did. I wonder who she was ? "

Pete smiled, his whole face lighting up with an expression of such happiness that Heritage marvelled.

" She's all you say," said the big cattleman. I've known that ways about her for long enough, only I couldn't put it into words like you done. She's a grand girl is Jeannie, the best friend and the truest comrade a sinful man could wish to have. It's always sort of puzzled me to know how Charley Salter had the luck to get a girl like Jean."

Heritage's astonishment showed on his face. " You don't mean to say that was a daughter of Charley Salter ? "

" The only chick the Salters have got," said Pete. "Funny you never guessed who she was. Not that she's got the looks of either of her parents, 'cepting her mother's eyes maybe. Yes, that was Jean Salter right enough. They's no girl on this coast can touch her when it comes to reckoning up the things that count in the making of a good woman." He added, as a kind of afterthought, " Unless it's Peggy Adaire, perhaps."

The name passed unnoticed by Heritage. He was still intent on his first subject.

" Well, Miss Salter has a fine, open, generous face," he said heartily. " There is one thing though that still puzzles

me a little. I hope you will not misunderstand the question I am going to ask. It is not intended, of course, to reflect on anyone. I find myself wondering how it is that Miss Salter seems so different in every way from what you might expect, considering her father's roughness of manner, and so on. Her refinement, the way she speaks and acts . . . It isn't easy to reconcile the facts. I'm not offending you ? "

" You ain't offending nobody," said Pete. " Your question is natural enough. You see Jeannie and Peg Adaire was sent to college in Hobart when they was small girls. They's that much will go to the credit of Charley and Phil Adaire anyhow—that they weren't content the kiddies should grow up ignorant as most of us hereabouts. They done their best to have their girls eddicated ; and, by glory, they spent the money well. I'll leave it to you to say what schooling has made of Jean Salter, anyhow. Both the girls could hold their own against the best ever, but they won't leave their daddies. You couldn't pry them away with a cant-dog. They kind of thought they was needed at home, so back they come when the schooling was over. I mind driving along to Green Valley with old Charley to fetch them. That was more'n five years ago. I hadn't been on this coast then for over a month. When I first met those two girls Jean must have been about twenty and Peggy eighteen."

" Peggy Adaire ? That's a pretty Irish name," commented Heritage. " Who exactly is she ? "

" Why, I reckon it's near enough to say she's the daughter of old Phil Adaire," said the cattleman, with a faint smile " It's all I know, or want to know myself. If they's a prettier girl anywhere about, all I can say is I ain't met her. Peggy Adaire is a peach." Of a sudden he became serious. " You was telling me about meeting up with Jean. I'm sort of interested."

" Of course," said Heritage. He picked up the thread of his narrative and related events to the time of sighting Pete and his dog. At the conclusion he chanced to look directly at the cattleman and was surprised at the change in the man's face. Pete's lips were set in a straight line and his black eyes sparkled angrily. Meeting Heritage's concerned gaze the big man broke into a short laugh.

" By the Lord, if Gus Rebner's been worrying Jeannie I'll beat him up in a way he won't forget. It was him fired at you all right. What for, I dunno. You can bet that Jean does though. She knew he was planted back in them bushes

getting ready to plug you in earnest if you started poking your nose in after him. That was why she kept you from going ahead as you wanted to. You can thank her that you wasn't hurt as well as scared. I reckon that Gus is a snake. So's his mate, Tom Login; I've warned them two more'n once what I'd do to them if they didn't keep out of my business. They'll try it once too often."

The whole man seemed suddenly transformed. The lines of his face had become hard and cruel, and the slow, good-natured tones of his voice had given place to a vigorous fierceness. The kangaroo dog, seeming to sense its master's new mood, bared its teeth in a gurgling snarl. The sound appeared to recall Pete to himself, for he made instant effort to calm.

"Getting riled, am I?" he said, as if speaking to himself. He reached out and tugged the dog's ear playfully. "And so were you, you old heathen, Pup. We're a pair of bad-tempered good-for-nothings. It don't seem as if I'll ever break that temper of mine. I wouldn't care so much, only I kind of promised Jeannie I'd do my best. And when you make a promise to her, Pup, it's got to be kept. I reckon they ain't anything she could ast me that I wouldn't try do."

Heritage sought to relieve an awkward silence by referring to his own grievance.

"What do you suppose is the reason for the unpleasant welcome they gave me at the Ferry, Mr. Diamond?"

The prefix appeared to amuse the cattleman. He grinned with his former good humour. "Meaning me, was you? I ain't no mister, and never was. Pete too much of a mouthful for you?"

"Well then, Pete," laughed Heritage.

"That's better. What else has a man got a name for if it ain't to be called by. Now about your question. I ain't sure why Rebner acted as he did, but I got a good guess. It's likely he took you for a revenue policeman. You ain't that, anyway. Jess exactly what are you?"

"I'm sometimes puzzled to know myself," said Heritage truthfully. "I'm supposed to be a lawyer, but it doesn't necessarily follow that I am one. As a matter of fact, I begin to have a suspicion that the law was the last thing for which I was intended. I don't like it, and I'm not ashamed to say so. For the present, I've come to Timber Bend to look for a man called Barkley. I suppose you don't know the name?"

"I don't. So you're a lawyer, Jack? I'm bound to say it's a trade I ain't got much time for, but no doubt they's good and bad in it. Now about this Barkley person. What's he done? Been getting himself into trouble?"

Heritage was disinclined to enter into particulars too fully. He contented himself with a vague disclaimer. "Oh, no. It's merely a business matter. All the same, it's essential I should find the man if he's above ground—and I think he is. In fact, I believe him to be somewhere on this coast. He won't be easy to find. At first I thought it would be an easy matter, but now I know better. In rough country like this a man could bury himself for years."

"If they was a reason why he should, it wouldn't be a very hard thing for him to do," said Pete drily. "This coast is full of hide-outs, as they call them. What was Barkley's full name, and how long since you seen him?"

"I never set eyes on him in my life," explained Heritage. "His full name is Peter Philip Barkley. Fifteen or twenty years ago he left the neighbourhood of Launceston and came down the coast here—we think to Timber Bend. I've got to make a start somewhere, so I came here first. I may pick up his tracks from someone who knew of him. He must have had friends somewhere."

Pete Diamond rose and stretched himself. "Well, if they's a man on this coast called Barkley, I never heard of him," he declared. "That don't signify anything after all, of course. I keep myself to myself pretty well, and others do the same. We live in the present only. A man's past is his own. Well, how 're you thinking to make a start, eh? Going to settle down here a week or two?"

"I don't see what else I can do," said Heritage. "After I've made a few inquiries I shall be in a better position to judge. In the meantime I've still to find board and lodging. By the way, you said Rebner might have taken me for a policeman. Why a policeman? Has Rebner been expecting a visit from one? Do they often make the trip down here?"

It was the cattleman's turn to be vague apparently. He seemed to avoid a direct answer. "Why, you see they's always the chance of a John dropping in on us on the hop like. It don't signify one way or the other, of course. The police ain't too well liked along the coast. It's natural, I suppose."

"In a region like this there are sure to be a few hard characters," said Heritage, reflectively. "I remember that

my partner, Colvin, told me that Timber Bend had a reputation for sly-grog selling and skin running. What is skin running?"

Had he been less preoccupied he might have caught the quick, almost suspicious glance the cattleman shot at him.

"Skin running? Why, yes, I can tell you what that is," said Pete slowly. "It's getting skins out to market under the nose of the police. Kangaroo and Black Possums are protected most of the year. Last season only lasted a month, and they say they won't be any open season at all this year. Skins aren't worth taking now, anyway. It's too late in the year. Still, they's all the winter skins to get rid of yet. You see they's a heavy penalty for trapping in close season. But there's a fine price waiting for any skins that can be smuggled across to the mainland. They's a small fortune in it. Some folks think it's worth the risk."

"I see. Well, I wonder if you would advise me about getting board and lodging. D'you think they would take me in at the Ferry House after all, if things were explained?"

"I wouldn't risk it," said Pete. "If they think you got anything to do with the police, it's going to take a mighty long time to show 'em otherwise. You owning up to being a lawyer ain't going to help you there. They's too much law about it. And the law and the police ain't very far apart. Now I'm riding across to the Salters. If you care to go along, they's a horse I can lend you. It's more'n likely Mrs. Salter would be glad to board you awhile, 'specially as you're on the right side of old Charley. And Jeannie you've met. You'd be more comfortable there than at the Ferry, and you'd be right where you'd meet folks. What say?"

"If I didn't accept your suggestion I should be tempting Providence," said Heritage, pleasantly surprised at the extent of the big cattleman's friendliness. "It's jolly kind of you, Pete, to go to so much trouble for a stranger like myself. If ever I can pay you back you must let me know."

Pete smiled. "Forget it. You done Charley Salter a good turn, and I reckon his friends are mine—and Jeannie's. You wait here with Pup a spell, till I hunt up the horses."

Left to himself Heritage found time to review matters with more of understanding than he had thought to a short time back. He hoped fervently that this was to prove the end of his unpleasant experience. So far as Gus Rebner was concerned he had little doubt that an explanation was all

that was necessary to put relations between them on a friendly footing. He could not conceal from himself however his instinctive dislike of the man. Any man capable of ambushing another in the way Rebner had done would bear a lot of watching, he told himself.

From Rebner his thoughts came back to Pete Diamond, and he was surprised to discover how undecidedly his judgment baulked at the big cattleman. Pete was one of a type wholly strange to him. His singular personality puzzled Heritage badly. At one moment he felt attracted; the next, repelled. He thought of the man's evident love for the wounded dog, the woman-like tenderness with which he tended the animal, and his heart warmed towards him. Then came the recollection of Pete's face as he told him of Jean Salter and Rebner, and Heritage pursed his lips doubtfully. There was, however, no denying the big fellow's entire friendliness towards himself. For this, at any rate, he felt more than grateful.

Of one thing Heritage was tolerably certain. Pete Diamond could be nothing by halves. With him would be no mean between loving and hating. A man of extremes, passionate, headstrong; yet withal an intensely lovable character. Such a man held almost infinite capacity for good or evil. He could prove by turn a staunch, eager friend, and a keen, relentless, almost vindictive enemy. As the world met him, so he, rough hewn by circumstance and disdaining compromise, would give unreservedly of both the good and the evil that was in him. A man to fear, but a man capable of inspiring unswerving loyalty and affection.

Heritage's reflections were cut short by the return of Pete with the horses, a pair of rough-haired, stocky geldings, about sixteen hands, with long backs, high withers, and ugly fiddle heads. It appeared, however, that this was a case of handsome is as handsome does.

"Out of sisters by the one sire," defended the cattleman, tumbling some riding gear out of the second tent. "Jeannie named 'em Tick and Tack, but you can hardly tell t'other from which. They've got a pedigree that would make a dead Chinaman blush, but there ain't a hoof on the coast can touch 'em for long distance travelling. They ain't any better looking than a sick badger, but they're all there when it comes to work. You can ride Tack."

"Do I get a saddle to sit on?" asked Heritage, a bit anxiously. His riding experience had ended abruptly on his

outgrowing the pony of his schoolboy days. He did not relish the idea of a bare-backed re-appearance. He doubted if he could stick on under such circumstances, anyhow. "Have you got two saddles?"

"I've got three," said Pete, see-sawing a strap through the buckle in an effort to tighten the girth. "I never see such brutes of horses as these. When I go to put the saddle on they swell themselves out like a schoolboy at a party. Yes, I got three saddles. I got funny ideas of my own about horses. One of them is that if you can give a moke a saddle of its own you ain't going to lose by it in the end. One saddle doing duty for two horses ain't good for the saddle or the mokes either. It's like a man and his son wearing the same pair of boots turn about. What fits one back don't fit another. A saddle fits to the shape of the horse's back, and no two backs are alike. You can gall a horse by a clumsy seat all right, but more often it's done by an ill-fitting saddle. Climb up and try the length of your stirrups. You're right."

Before mounting his own horse the cattleman shifted Pup under cover of the tent fly, and put a big dish of water and a shinbone of beef within easy reach.

"No one will get to fossicking those tents while Pup's there, lame and all as he is," he remarked, as they rode away. "I don't have to chain him, even when he's not sick. Train a dog right at the start, and he'll stop where you set him till the cows come home. Chaining a dog is a damn cruel thing, anyway."

Pete led the way over the sandhills till they struck the beach. This they followed to the mouth of the river. Remembering his difficulty in crossing at the ferry, Heritage began to wonder how it was proposed to transport the horses on the return passage. Pete put his mind at rest by reverting to the matter of his own accord.

"You crossed 'The Bat' in Daddy William's dingey, didn't you say, Jack? Most generally I hop over on the bar when the tide's out, as it is now. It ain't more than three feet at the deepest, and they's no two ways about this being the quickest crossing. See where the current hits the sea jess ahead of us there. They say the old Bat makes underground when she reaches here, but I dunno. Let your horse follow mine. He knows the way. Getting over ain't as hard as you might think."

Heritage was glad to have the assurance. The swirling

flood which separated them from the farther bank looked anything but inviting. A bare chain seawards the water foamed and boiled, leaping skywards in a drifting smoke of spray. The noise of the waves on the beaches below was almost deafening. Without hesitation Pete put his horse at the water. The animal began to pick its way composedly along the rock bottom of the bar. Heritage's own mount followed immediately. In a few seconds they were across and riding down the bank to the coast again. A mile up Pete turned inland and they climbed the knolls to the plain beyond.

It was late in the afternoon when they came finally to Salters. The house was on a slight rise skirting the edge of the timber. As they drew close Heritage saw that it was built of weatherboard, with iron roofs and one brick chimney. A wire and picket fence enclosed three sides of a neat garden. the fourth boundary being marked by a narrow creek. At the back of the house were some outbuildings. On either side were cultivation paddocks.

The cattleman rode his horse round to the stable with the easy assurance of the regular visitor. Suddenly he pursed his lips in a shrill whistle. It was answered almost immediately from somewhere close at hand. As Heritage dropped stiffly to the ground a girl—his girl of the clearing, came round the side of a haystack. The sight of himself in company of Pete Diamond brought an expression of comical bewilderment to her face. Her lips parted as if to speak, but she checked the impulse. Instead she bowed slightly and turned to Pete, a question in her wide open eyes. The cattleman held both his hands out to the girl with a little chuckle of sly amusement.

"Glory to goodness, Jeannie, don't look at me like that. It's quite all right. Yes, I know all about this morning. They's been something of a muddle all round. This is Jack Heritage. Your father knows something of him. It was the old man that sent him along to me. You never knew your Dad to size up a man wrong, did you? Jack here and me is pretty good friends already."

She accepted Pete's assurance without question. Turning to Heritage she held out her hand. "Mr. Heritage and I have the advantage of an informal acquaintance. We met this morning. Of course you have heard all about it, Pete? I wonder why my father has not mentioned your name, Mr. Heritage. Have you known him for long?"

"I met him yesterday, for the first time," said Heritage, with a smile. "So you see, Miss Salter, he is hardly likely to bother anyone by mentioning my existence. I was able to do him a very slight service (at least, he persisted in regarding it as such) and in return he told me to find out Pete if I met with any difficulty at all. As a matter of fact, until I took your father's advice I met with little else. For a while I seemed to be the most unpopular person in Tasmania. You yourself know a little of my experience. It was due to mistaken identity, I believe. Pete has suggested that someone took me for a policeman."

Jean Salter answered the inquiry in his voice with a little shrug of her shoulders. "And you're not? It was too bad of everybody, wasn't it? Perhaps I owe you an apology, Mr. Heritage, for my share in the matter. However, no harm has come of our mistake fortunately, and explanations are such tiresome things, aren't they? You must let us make amends as best we can."

On the face of it Heritage could hardly persist. If she chose to leave the matter as it stood he had no option save to stifle his curiosity as best he could. Slightly piqued though he was, he could not but help admire the straight-out manner in which she showed her disinclination to enter into particulars of the morning's incident.

"I quite agree that explanations are decidedly tiresome. I am far too rejoiced at the present satisfactory state of affairs to worry over what is past. Life is full of unexplained happenings. I suppose I ought not to shirk my share."

A little gleam of amusement lit her eye. Heritage guessed she was inwardly laughing at his discomfiture; not unkindly, simply with her woman's appreciation of his natural curiosity. Almost at once, however, her face regained its seriousness.

"You'll take tea with us, of course, Mr. Heritage? Pete always does when he comes to see us. Father will be glad to see you again. He loves to hear news of the outside world. Are you staying at the Ferry House?"

Pete Diamond seemed suddenly to be reminded of one reason, at least, for his visit.

"Why, Jeannie, you see that was why I brought Jack along here. He couldn't get in at the Ferry, and they ain't nowhere else to go. I was thinking p'raps your mother could find him board and lodging till he finds how things are. It would be company for your father too."

"I see," said the girl, looking at Heritage gravely. "Yes,

I think perhaps it could be managed. Shall we go up to the house and see what mother says. It must be nearly tea-time."

To Heritage's relief Mrs. Salter, a gentle-faced, grey-haired woman, with quaint slow speech, approved of the suggestion at once. From his seat by the fire Charley Salter looked on with a friendly grin.

"'Day, Pete. 'day, Mr. Heritage. I kind of thought it wouldn't be too long before I saw you again. So they froze you out at the Ferry, eh? I had a feeling it would be that way, but didn't like to discourage you. Jess as well for you to find things out for yourself. Sit right down and fill your pipe. Well, Jean girl? What are you frowning at me like that for?"

"A nice father for a girl to have," she said, shaking a finger at him accusingly. "Here we are, mother and I, simply dying for news of any sort, and not a word do you tell us. So you and Mr. Heritage came along together on the coach to Green Valley. You never breathed a word about it. Did he, mother? I call it mean."

"Well, now—no more I did," confessed the stout man, guiltily. "Must have forgot, I reckon. I was sort of full right up to the eyebrows with business. I should have told you later though. Yes, I certainly should." He looked at his daughter appealingly as she moved towards the door. "You ain't going out again, Jeannie? Tea's all set."

"Just down to the stable with Pete to help him stable the horses" said the girl, blowing him a kiss. "You're forgiven this time; eh, mother? We'll be back in a few minutes."

"Well, don't be too long," called the stout man. "You know you promised the Adaires you'd go across after tea."

As the door closed after them Pete Diamond turned to the girl with a wonderful tenderness transforming the sternness of his face.

"It's real good, seeing you again, Jeannie. I kind of count the days between visits. Happy?"

She smiled at him a little wistfully. "You big boy . . of course I'm happy. Don't I look it?"

Pete surveyed her gravely in the fading light. "I dunno. You ought to be. And yet they's lines round your eyes that I don't like to see there. You ain't worrying?"

"How can I help worrying a little; you know what about," said Jean Salter slowly. She put a hand on his arm, "Pete, why can't you make an end of this business? Is it

worth the risk? As if anything really mattered—poverty, or sickness, or . . or even death, so long as what we have is come by cleanly and honestly. Besides, with you the risk is a double one. You know without me telling you that there are some people here would be only too glad to see your finish. If you knew how the whole thing is haunting me? . . . Not that I believe it to be actually wrong. I don't. Only, you see, others take a different view."

The big cattleman patted her hand reassuringly. "The others be . . . be sugared. Ain't a man to have a little excitement now and then. Now don't you worry. I'm big enough to take care of myself. They couldn't get anything on me if they tried."

"And to-day . . . when Mr. Heritage came along." Jean's voice trembled a little. "Pete, it will really happen like that one of these days. I thought . . Rebner thought he was one of Saddler's men."

"Aye, I guessed that much," said the cattleman more soberly. "So it was Rebner fired that shot. You ain't told me yet jess how the thing happened." He fell silent a moment, looking at her. His next words came with such sharpness that Jean looked up at him with an expression of almost fear.

"You ain't told me what Rebner was doing around there. He ain't been troubling you, has he?"

"Pete . . . how your eyes snap. No, dear, he hasn't been bothering me. Our being there together was an accident. Gus Rebner is always civil to me. Only sometimes he looks at me in that cold snakey way of his. I don't think he means any harm, really I don't. Not yet, anyhow. Pete, I forbid you to quarrel with that man. He and Login are not like other men. There's a something purely animal about both of them that seems to show them capable of almost anything bad. It frightens me to think that they might turn against you."

Pete laughed scornfully. "They ain't going to hurt me. A pair of snakes them two; but even a snake ain't hard to scotch when you see it in time. And they's no man living going to take you from me, unless you say so. So you come on Rebner by accident this morning?"

"Yes. I was riding back from our run where I'd been to have a look round the cattle while Daddy was away. I came on Gus settling himself with his shot-gun among the bushes at the side of the track. I found afterwards that he'd tied

his horse up on the lower road by Grey Lagoon, and cut through the scrub on foot. I guessed he was up to some mischief and questioned him. He told me a policeman was coming along from Hennessy's, where he'd stayed overnight. Gus had seen him there, he said. He was going to try and scare the policeman home again, if he could. He didn't mean to kill him, or even wound him, you understand. He just wanted to frighten him badly enough to send him back to where he came from. It was a ridiculous idea. I tried to make Gus see what a risk he was running, but he wouldn't listen. And while I was arguing Mr. Heritage came along and Gus let fly at him. The horse bolted, I think, and Gus made back into the scrub swearing that he was going to shoot in earnest next time. I got him to promise he would wait till he found out who Mr. Heritage was; because, you know, he doesn't look a bit like a plain clothes policeman. Well, while we were talking we suddenly heard Mr. Heritage coming towards us through the bushes and Gus ran ahead and planted behind some logs. He said he'd fire to hit if Mr. Heritage found him there. I started singing . . . I don't know why; there didn't seem to be anything else to do."

Pete's expression was one of mingled anger and admiration. He put his arm protectingly across the girl's shoulders. "They ain't many girls would do what you done, Jeannie. They's no braver girl anywhere than you. I'm real proud of you. All the same, they must be no more of it. I can't have you taking risks of that sort. Give Rebner and Login a wide berth. They ain't to be trusted. And don't worry about me. Once I get through I'll fix the two of them good and plenty, if they get to looking for trouble. They ain't the bad men they think themselves. D'you know it wouldn't have mattered after all if Jack Heritage had searched those bushes where Gus crawled in. He wouldn't have found anyone. Gus lit out right away. I know that, because Jack found him at the Ferry when he got there. Gus and the rest of them turned Jack down cold. That's why he come on to me. I'm glad he did. I kind of like Jack. I think he's a man."

The words were spoken simply, without affectation. Mock modesty was no part of the big cattleman's creed. Heritage's estimate of him had been remarkably near the truth. Pete Diamond was a man of moods, yet staunchly faithful to the promptings of his generous heart. He loved

fiercely, hated intolerantly. In neither case would he be ashamed to admit the fact. He could see nothing effeminate in the love of man for man. The story of David and Jonathan, of Damon and Pythias, would have appeared easy of understanding. They were 'mates.' The word explained itself.

So too was it with his love for Jean Salter. He worshipped the girl with every fibre of his big handsome body. Beneath her influence the grossness in his nature was passing away, fading into the past almost as if it had never been. He himself was as yet unconscious of the change that was taking place within him. He only knew that in some wonderful manner there had come to his starved, hungry affections the love of this girl so immeasurably beyond his worth ; this lithe-bodied, tawny-haired, splendid creature whose clear eyes mirrored all that was beautiful and womanly and stedfastly courageous.

"So do I," said Jean, after a little pause. "I liked Mr. Heritage as soon as I saw him. He has plenty of pluck. He would have gone after Rebner quite as a matter of course. What is his real business in The Bend, Pete ? "

"He's come to find a man named Barkley," said the cattleman. "Jess what he wants him for I dunno. I never heard the name on this coast. Have you ? "

She shook her head. Truth to tell Heritage and his affairs had small place in her thoughts. Of a sudden she put her hand on Pete's arm.

"Dear . . . won't you give it up. Pete, I'm frightened. One day, when we're least expecting it, they'll send someone along. And besides, you know it isn't worth it. Another man . . . but not you, Pete. They won't give you a chance. They're only waiting an excuse to bring the old trouble up against you. It's the one thing I can't understand about you. Well, enough for Login or Rebner perhaps, but not for my boy. You say you'll do anything I ask you. Do this then. Pete, you must."

At the passionate pleading in her voice the cattleman stirred uneasily. He made a little helpless gesture with his big hands. "Don't you think I would, Jeannie, if I could. Little girl, I ain't my own master in this. You don't understand. It ain't because I don't want to. I've give my promise to see this lot through safely. After that I'm quit for good and all. But I can't cut loose now. I jess can't. I never went back on a man like that in all my life. It's not you that would ast me to do it now."

The girl dropped her hand listlessly. "No, I suppose not. And yet I wish I could. Sometimes I get the feeling that we're living in a fool's paradise; that what we hope will never be. Don't look at me like that, dear. I'm not meaning that either of us can change. Our love is not that kind. Only there's a kind of numb feeling at my heart that seems to warn me against hoping too much. Oh, Pete . . . such a beautiful hope . . . to spend our lives together! It's little enough to pray for surely."

Pete's face began to work oddly. He caught the girl to him almost roughly, his hands stroking clumsily at the tawny curls on her bowed head. "You ain't well, Jeannie . . . to talk like that. They's nothing can ever take you from me." Of a sudden his voice broke hoarsely and he flung out his arm in passionate defiance. "Why, not even God Almighty could do that!"

"Oh, hush . . . hush!" said the girl, in sudden affright. She put a hand to his lips. "Pete, it's wicked. There, I've frightened you with my fancies."

Night was coming down over the plains. Across the face of the waning sunset crept a huge bank of clouds, blotting the rose and sapphire of the evening sky with a mantle of purple mist. The wind had dropped suddenly and the timber line showed tall and unbending against the glowing background of the western horizon. Over the distant ridge of hills stars sprang into twinkling light.

Pete released the girl gently. "Your Dad's calling from the house. I reckon we best fix the horses and get along in." He smiled whimsically. "I can smell dough-nuts for tea. I bet I could eat a bushel of them things! A good deal of a cook is your mother!"

CHAPTER V

HERITAGE found nothing to complain of in the welcome accorded him by Charley Salter. The stout man betrayed a mingling of amusement and concern on hearing of his meeting with Jean Salter and the coolness of his reception at the Ferry.

"They ain't many could scare Jean," he declared, with one of his fat chuckles. "Jess where my girl gets her pluck from I dunno! Me? I'm kind of timid. Always was. Maybe my heart and liver got mixed when I was little. I reckon they's a good strain of her mother in Jean."

He mused a moment, then resumed in graver tones, "That Gus will certainly take a lot of watching. He's poison clean through to his boots. Seems like you was lucky to get off as light as you did, seeing Gus took you for a policeman. It was Hennessy that set that yarn going, I'll be bound. I kind of wonder at Jean believing it, knowing Hennessy as she does."

"Even so, surely Miss Salter would have no reason to fear a visit from the police," said Heritage. "It really looked that way to me at the time, all the same. I can see now that I was all wrong in thinking that."

Salter wriggled his bulk uneasily. "I jess told you Jean ain't frightened of anyone, didn't I?" he demanded. "I reckon that knowing what a cranky fool Gus is she was troubled they'd be blood shed if she didn't butt in. Ain't thinking she's done anything wrong, are you?"

"Good Lord, no!" said Heritage hastily. "I'm sure I'm heartily thankful to your daughter for the trouble she went to save my hide from a peppering. Well, it's not likely that Rebner will make the same mistake again. He'll be all right once he learns I haven't come to interfere in any business of his."

Salter smiled dubiously. "Maybe he will. Well, tea's about ready. There's Pete and Jean jess coming up from the stables. Maybe you'd like Mother to show you your bedroom before you eat."

Heritage found his sleeping quarters to consist of a tiny skillio off the end of the verandah at the back of the house. The furnishing was simple but scrupulously clean. He felt that with the arrival of his luggage he would be comfortable enough.

Pete Diamond hailed him as he re-entered the kitchen. "Jean and me are going across to Adaire's place after tea. If you ain't too tired maybe you'd like to come along and get acquainted. Old Phil Adaire has been along this coast more years than I can remember. If they's any man can set you finding your Barkley person, it'll be old Phil. What say?"

"I'll be glad to go with you, if I shan't be in the way," said Heritage.

"You won't be," the cattleman assured him simply. "I wouldn't have ast you else."

His bluntness of speech was at times apt to prove disconcerting. Heritage, however, was quickly convinced that no offence was ever intended. Pete spake as he acted—plainly and to the point, with a kind of native honesty which lost its crudeness by reason of its evident sincerity.

The moon was well free of the timber when they left for Adaire's house. The night was calm and clear, the air faintly murmurous with the hum of myriad insect wings. Little by little the soft radiance of the moon crept over the slumbering plains, touching the out-croping rocks with silver and spreading tiny pools of light between the bushes. To right and left long lines of tall deadwood gleamed white against the dense blackness of the living scrub beyond. From the paper-bark swamps came the reverberating boom of frogs.

"It ain't always as peaceful looking as it is to-night," said Pete, as they threaded their way through the bush. "You should see the plains after a week or two of south-westerly weather. The ground under your feet is like a big sponge and the air's cold enough to freeze the marrow in your spine. It ain't any too safe in the big timber when they's a wind on, and that's most always in the winter and spring. They's times it looks like it ain't ever going to calm down again."

"Well, I don't ask for anything better than this," commented Heritage, looking about him with keen delight. "I don't suppose I shall be here to experience the wet season. I hope to be back home long before that arrives. It will depend how things go with the business in hand. I may be

wrong, but I've got a feeling that I shall run my man to earth without much difficulty."

It was on the tip of Jean Salter's tongue to ask why he wanted to find this man Barkley. She refrained however, from putting the thought into words. To appear in the slightest degree curious as to the business which brought Heritage from the mainland would have been in direct opposition to the simple etiquette to which her kindly nature held. Any exchange of confidence must come about naturally, or not at all. Especially in the present instance might the rule pertain. After the events of the morning, with her inability to explain much that must still be puzzling Heritage, she could hardly expect a recognition of her own curiosity.

In any case the opportunity was soon lost. Pete Diamond exclaimed suddenly at a point of light which showed itself ahead of them.

"They've got the front room all lit up. Maybe they's been some company to tea. You don't happen to know, do you, Jean?"

"Pete is the most unsociable man on the coast, I do believe," said the girl teasingly. "If a stranger comes within a mile of him, Mr. Heritage, he wants to run away."

"I'm afraid I can't admit that," said Heritage smiling. "Am I not a living example of Pete's social instincts? But for him I should probably be starving at this very minute."

"That's all right," said the cattleman, unconcernedly. "I reckon they ain't anyone home but only the old man and Peggy after all. That's the best of them French windows, as they calls them. They're wide open and I can see right through into the room. Looks like old Phil was getting ready to make music. It ain't often you catch him in the mood."

They were almost abreast of the fence by this time. Only a narrow strip of garden that nodded faintly in the scented shadows, separated them from the open windows beyond. There came suddenly the music of chords struck on a piano by a practised hand. To Heritage the performer was invisible. He could see only a corner of the lighted room. It struck him as remarkable that a piano was to be found in such a remote corner of the bush.

As he wondered, there came a moment of silence. Pete had reached out a hand to open the gate, but Jean Salter caught at his arm with a little exclamation.

"Down! . . . quick!" she breathed, sinking in among the bushes around them. "Oh, Pete . . hurry before she sees us!"

To Heritage the words and action were wholly incomprehensible. He continued standing, till the cattleman caught him smartly under the joint of the knee with the edge of his big hand. As he collapsed in a hurry, the big fellow whispered fiercely:

"Down, can't you! Jean thinks she's going to sing."

Who was going to sing? Remembering the unmelodious efforts of Jean Salter in the clearing that morning, Heritage felt more bewildered than ever. He was about to brave Pete's anger by a question, when he chanced to look directly towards the lighted room in front of them. A girl had stepped suddenly into view.

She was dressed all in white. Her face was in the shadow, but Heritage could see, even at that distance, the shining mass of her piled up hair. As he watched she came quietly up to the open window and stood there, a slim white form framed in grey shadows. It seemed that she was looking straight at Heritage. So conscious was he of her gaze that he felt his face grow hot at the thought that she must indeed see and misconstrue his presence there. As he nestled yet deeper into the bushes there came once more the notes of a piano in the opening bars of a well-known melody. Almost immediately the girl at the window began to sing.

In trying afterwards to piece his sensations together Heritage could only wonder at the completeness of his surrender to the glamour of that moment. The voice, the setting, the crooning notes of the accompaniment, gripped him completely. He crouched back in the shadow, hardly daring to breathe, staring incredulously at the faint disc of the singer's up-turned face, the while he marvelled at the purity and volume of the glorious voice that went throbbing into the night. Heritage knew the song well; knew it and loved it. He had heard it a score of times on the concert platform; sung, too, by some of the reputed songsters of the world. It's simple touching melody never failed to move him. Yet never before had he felt such exquisite response within his own soul to the haunting pathos of the theme.

Almost before he realised it the song was ended. Silence fell, save for the momentary cadence of the echoes awakened by the full, sustained notes of the climax. Jean Salter rose

quietly to her feet. She called softly, yet with a little break in her voice that Heritage recognised and understood.

" Did you ever hear anything more glorious than that, Mr. Heritage ? Goodness knows I'm not sentimental, but I always feel that I want to cry at the beauty of Peggy Adaire's singing. What a God-given voice. And yet she seldom uses it. I don't know why."

Softly as Jean had spoken the sound appeared to reach the ears of the girl standing motionless at the window. She came to the railing of the verandah and peered towards them. Her clear voice asked a question :

" Who is there ? "

Jean Salter broke into mischievous laughter. " We caught you properly this time, Peggy. Oh, you darling ! . . . if I had your voice I would conquer the world with it."

The slender white figure moved out of the shadows and came to meet them. " So you were hiding there all the time I was singing ? Jean, Jean, . . . you bad girl ! You know how shy I am of any audience. And you too, Pete ? "

Heritage suddenly thrilled to a consciousness that she was looking at him. He in turn could not keep his eyes from her. She stood revealed by the moonlight, her face a perfect oval framed in the glistening coils of her hair. He could even see the white, even teeth behind her slightly parted lips. Only her eyes were veiled from his eager gaze by long, sweeping lashes. He found himself wondering what colour her eyes might be. The thought took possession of him, so that he continued to stare at her mutely. Jean Salter came to his rescue.

" Peggy, this is Mr. Heritage. He is visiting Timber Bend on business and is staying with us. Mr. Heritage, this is Miss Adaire."

The girl bowed slightly in response to Heritage's rather embarrassed greeting. Almost immediately she turned again to her friends.

" You are very subdued this evening, Pete. Has Jean been teasing you ? "

Pete smiled contentedly. " She's always teasing me ; but it ain't that made me quiet." He shook his head deliberately. " You'll think I'm kind of soft, but it's your singing that gets right home on me. Seems like they was something about it reminds me of when I was little. They's a heartache in most every note you sing."

Heritage eyed the cattleman approvingly. This was an almost exact translation of his own feeling. What could it be, he wondered, that was responsible for the sad quality in this girl's voice. Why her reluctance to sing when others were near? Was she unhappy? It seemed that even her answering smile was a trifle wistful.

"Thank you, Pete. I think I know what you mean by that." She seemed to hesitate. "Others have told me the same thing, if not quite so prettily. And yet . . . I don't exactly know why, but I love sad music. I am afraid I am in danger of growing morbid."

She linked her arm in Jean's with a little laugh. "Shall we go inside? Mr. Heritage, would you care to meet my father? You will find him quiet, and timid of strangers, but I am sure he will make an exception in your favour. Any friend of Pete and Jean is welcome to our home."

It was said very graciously yet the sweet voice sounded just a little hesitant. Heritage experienced a queer sensation of unrest. "She *is* unhappy over something," he told himself, half angrily. "Good God! it's not natural for a girl like that to be unhappy. And yet, confound it, what business is it of mine?"

Old Adaire had left the piano and was sitting in an easy chair by the window. The light of the kerosene lamp hanging from the low ceiling shone feebly on his white hair and beard. Heritage was instantly impressed by the clean-cut, delicate refinement of the face turned towards him.

"Jean and Pete, Daddy," said Peggy Adaire softly, as they went past him into the room. "And a friend of theirs. This is Mr. Heritage."

The old man held out one thin hand in welcome. "Glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Heritage. You will excuse me from rising, I hope. It is all my daughter's fault. She insists that I rest as much as possible. She can be a dreadful tyrant at times. Eh, Jean?"

Jean Salter shook her tawny curls emphatically. "The idea. Peg a tyrant? And anyhow, it serves you right if she is! You do such foolish things when you aren't well. Oh, you men! What would you do without us? Daddy Adaire, I don't think you've anything much to complain of. Do you, Mr. Heritage?"

"Indeed no!" answered the young man quickly. "I fancy many of us would be glad to exchange places with Mr.

Adaire. It would be no hardship to suffer so fair a tyrant as Miss Adaire."

Instantly he was furious with himself for having said it. He had need only to note the startled look the girl turned towards him to realize his mistake. Even on the face of the big cattleman he thought he surprised a flash of almost contemptuous wonderment. Too late Heritage understood that these people, so far removed from the artificialities of city life, failed not to estimate vapid compliment at its true worth. The earnestness of their lives would not tolerate the petty insincerities to which he was himself accustomed. A kind of shame took hold of him.

At sight of the distress on his face Jean Salter softened her own expression immediately. She looked at him not unkindly.

"I wonder, Mr. Heritage, if you have noticed the furniture in this room? It is all of figured blackwood. Mr. Adaire made it all himself. Isn't it beautifully grained?"

Adaire looked round with a smile. "Every bit of it contained in one tree, too, Mr. Heritage. It was really the largest blackwood tree I have ever seen. I suppose it took me a couple of years to complete the suite. You see most of my time is taken up with the vegetable garden. Carpentering is a hobby I seldom find time to indulge."

Glad of a chance to hide his red face Heritage bent over a chair in hasty inspection. Appreciation of Adaire's workmanship awoke in him an interest which served to put him more at ease.

"This wood is very beautiful. Is it hard to work? It looks as if it might be."

"The figure is," said the old man. "The plain wood though is fairly easy. It's purely a matter of how the grain runs. You must work to it, not away from it. In some cases it's not easy to determine which way the grain lies. Still, patience will accomplish most things, eh?"

Pete Diamond was eyeing the polished wood thoughtfully. "Do you know there's a fortune in this kind of thing?" he asked. "The trouble seems to be that the timber trade is in the hands of a half-dozen or so big firms that won't give an outsider a look in. Your father tried to get past them once, Jean, and they set out to claw him to pieces. Seems they're kind of hogs, them timber folks. They want to grab everything for themselves."

Jean's eyes were shining indignantly. "Oh, they do,

indeed. Only don't call them hogs, Pete. Why slander a useful animal, even if it is a dirty one. Father's name is the better one. He calls those people timber wolves. They are both ferocious and cowardly. A hog may be selfish, but once you yard him the trouble is over. But with men like Garraway, here on The Bend, and Sam Frame, over on the mainland, it's a different matter. If you get in their way they want to tear you to pieces. They, and the rest of their kind, are just human wolves."

The vehemence with which the girl spoke quite startled Heritage. Remembering his relations with Frame he felt none too comfortable. Diffidently he sought for further enlightment.

"But is there then a real reason why some of you local people cannot market timber for yourselves; financial considerations quite apart. I mean, it isn't a question of infringement on other's rights is it? These people you speak of haven't a monopoly in the trade, have they?"

"Actually, they have," said the girl. "It's the monopoly of might. From a moral point of view, of course they haven't a leg to stand on. The forests belong to the people; not to any one man or combination of men. You or I should have as much right to lease and market a timber area as Frame has. But do you think for a moment that we should be permitted to do so? Take Timber Bend, for instance. Frame would see to it that we never got our logs through to a market. The only outlet we have is the tramline connecting us with the jetty at Sun Port. Who owns the shares in that tramline? Who controls it? Frame does. Our logs would simply rot on the skidways. I'm not guessing this, I know it. I've seen it done here already. No, the attempt would be hopeless; unless you had plenty of capital behind you, and influence enough to scare a little decency into the timber ring."

"You seem to have studied the matter pretty thoroughly," observed Heritage.

Jean shrugged her shoulders. "I've heard father talking about it. The matter is hardly worth bothering about, after all. In any case it is not fair to worry you with a recital of our woes."

Heritage disclaimed boredom. "I may be more interested than you think."

He was on the point of making known his acquaintance with Frame, when Pete Diamond held up a hand for silence.

" They's someone coming," announced the big man, casually. He listened a moment. " It ain't no stranger, either. Expecting anyone, Peggy ? "

The girl had gone to the window, where she stood looking out into the moon-lit night. She called back over her shoulder :

" Why, I do believe it's Sollum Joe." She waited a second, then cried softly : " Is that you, Joe ? "

The sound of shuffling feet came nearer. A cracked voice came cheerfully out of the night.

" Why, yes ; what's left of me, Miss Peggy. Seemed like I'd never get here. I'm a-getting old, that's what it is. Ain't as spry on my pins as I used to be. Kind of sore about my feet too. I see they's company here. I reckon I'd better beat it for camp agin."

" Don't be silly, Joe," said the girl reprovingly. " You know perfectly well that you and George are welcome here any time you care to come along. You're not frightened of Pete or Jean, are you ? Come inside." She stood back to let him pass, then broke into a bubble of laughter.

" Why, Joe ? whatever have you been doing to yourself ? Have you been in a snow storm ? I declare the top of your head is all white and glistening. Your shirt is all covered with the stuff."

Sollum Joe blinked at her solemnly. He was a little wizened shrimp of a man, clad in blue jumper and baggy moleskin trousers. A handkerchief was knotted loosely around his scraggy neck. He wore no hat, and his head was sprinkled thickly with a whitish powder. A pair of faded blue eyes regarded the occupants of the room with a kind of mournful humour.

" Yes 'm, I know I must be sort of queer looking. George done that. Yes, you can bet it was George done that ! "

" In the name of Mike, what is it you got on your head ? " asked Pete. " Been trying to take an impression of yourself in plaster of Paris ? Or have you been having another row with George Judney ? "

The little man wagged his head in acquiescence. " Sort of. This here powder is Brown's Bon Ami Baking Powder, warranted to rise bread and scones quicker'n a landlord rises the rent when the rates go up. At least, it says that on the wrapper. When George got to heaving the stuff around, I was right in the way. I come along to sort of borrow some more to make bread for the morning. They ain't any left

at the mill store, and Slum Garraway 'll roar like a bull if they ain't bread for the boys to-morrow. You got a spoonful of the stuff you could let me have, Miss Peggy ? "

" Heaps, Joe," said the girl encouragingly. " What have you two old men been quarrelling about this time ? Only that I know it's mostly make-belief, I could be really cross with you."

Sollum grinned feebly. It was easy to see the threat did not discourage him. " Might have been a gal, I reckon."

Pete Diamond burst into a roar of laughter. " A girl ? Well, of all the old idiots that ever walked, you and George take the bun ! Who is she ? "

Sollum grinned in ready sympathy. He even essayed a wink at the delighted cattleman.

" Kind of polite, ain't you, Pete ? If you wasn't so smaller than me, bust me if I wouldn't up and spank you. George was over at the Ferry to-day fixing a windlass handle for Williams. The red headed gal of Williams is making some tea and calls George to get a cup while it's going. Now you know George ain't no lady-killer, but he'd rise from his grave if you was to tap on his head-stone with a tea-pot. He's the champion tea swiller on the coast. He's that happy over the invite that he almost smiles. He drinks five pannicans of tea right hot off the fire, and gets home with pains in his inside. I'm there jess weighing flour for a batch of bread."

" Says George to me, ' Sollum, I ain't no lover of wimmen, but I do honestly believe that red-headed Venus at the Ferry could get me to eat out of her hand. She certainly don't wash the vegetables in the tea water,' he says. ' You call yourself a cook,' says George, ' why, you ain't acquainted with the first rumours of the colandry art. When you can make a pot of tea like Sadie Williams can, your children can rise and call you blessed—but not before,' he says."

" Says I, ' I ain't got any children, and you know it. I've never married in my life and don't want to be. As for that gal Williamses billy tea, why, stuff and nonesuch,' I says. ' And finally ' I says, ' I ain't got any children.' "

" ' I was speaking in semaphores,' says George. ' I know you ain't got any children. If you had you'd have pizzened them ages ago feeding them that swill water you miscall tea.' "

" I'm jess going to pour a mite of yeast into my dough pan when George says this here. It made me kind of annoyed the way he was talking. I ups with the yeast and heaves it

into his whiskers. Says I, ' When it comes to tea-making, I'm IT. Take that for slandering the dead children I never had ! ' I says. George lets out a yelp like a staked puppy. He picks the tin of baking powder offen the shelf and empties the lot right over my head. ' And that,' says he, ' is for comparing of yourself as a better cook than Sadie Williams. The one woman in the world,' says George, ' that knows how to make tea so's it would even tickle the inside of a celestial bean from another world.' Then he climbs into his bunk and goes to sleep, and I come on here for more powder."

The comical expression on the little man's dried up face awoke the risibility of his audience. In the laughter that followed Peggy Adaire slipped out into the kitchen, when she returned presently with a small parcel.

" Scones, Joe, and a piece of soda cake. And of course a little baking powder. And don't you and George quarrel any more. Not that you ever do quarrel in earnest. I believe that what you just told us was made up. How is George's rheumatism ? Has he used the liniment I sent him ? "

Sollum appeared a trifle embarrassed by the question. The little twinkle of mischief in his faded eyes, however, belied the affected gravity of his voice.

" Why, you see, Miss Peggy, George don't seem to take too kindly to the stuff, and that's a fact. Appeared like they was something in it burnt his tongue. He jess took one mouthful and lit out for the creek. I reckon his rheumatics weren't as bad as he thought, maybe ! "

" You don't mean to say he drank the liniment ? " exclaimed the girl, with a horrified expression. " I sent word expressly that he was to rub himself with it. Why, he might have poisoned himself ! Was his mouth burnt very badly ? Oh, the poor fellow ! "

" Now don't you get to worrying about George," advised Sollum soothingly. " He's drank that much tea that his inside is tanned harder than a trace chain. It was his own fault, anyhow. I told him myself that the stuff ain't to drink. Maybe you don't know jess how obstinate George can be."

" ' I once cured a sick calf of the hives,' says he. ' If they's anything about medicine that I don't know, I'd be obliged if you' mention it. Rheumatics is germs in the blood, ain't they ? ' says George. ' Very well then. Will

you tell me then how rubbing the outside of my legs is going to benefit posterity,' says he. 'And no disrespect to the lady that sent the stuff along to me,' says George. And with that he tilts the bottle to his mouth and lets some of it trickle down his neck. Suffering James, you should have seen the look on his face when the stuff began to sting him! He turns sort of yellow, like a poisoned finger, and turns over in his bunk with his eyes all tucked up into his forehead. Says he to me, 'You little pickle-berry-faced, bean-weevil of a man, ain't you going to do something for me? Instead of standing there like you are, grinning like a trapped cat. How in Mike's name was I to know the stuff had such a kick in it. I'm busting in halves,' says poor old George. 'Which way does the creek lie? I can't see for the smoke that's coming out of my eyes. Remember me to Bill Hardie!' he says."

"Joe . . . Joe! you're just making the story up as you go along," said Jean Salter severely. "Peggy child, how can you be so silly as to believe him. I declare you look quite miserable. Can't you see that Sollum's only humbugging us."

"Honest to goodness, George did drink a little of the stuff," declared Sollum earnestly. "It ain't hurt him though. Maybe I've been laying it on a bit thick, but if you could have heard George talking words at me like he done you'd have been tickled to death. He was nearly as amusing as a boil behind the ear. He talked about Bill Hardie for hours at a time."

The little man took a firmer hold of the parcel beneath his arm. "Well, I reckon I'll make tracks. They's bread to bake before the morning. Solong, friends."

As his footsteps died away into the night, Adaire turned to Heritage with an amused gleam in his eyes.

"Don't look so astounded, Mr. Heritage. When you come to know Sollum as well as we do, you will find him one of the truest-hearted men on the coast. His one fault is a love of exaggeration; yet he does it in such an entertaining way, that really I doubt if we would be satisfied to have him reform. He and his partner George Judney, are Peggy's particular protegés. She mothers them scandalously. And in return, you see, they torment the life out of her."

"Who are they?" asked Heritage. "I mean, what do they do for a living?"

"Why, as to that, they are at present hut-keeping for

Frame's manager, Garraway," said Adaire. "Actually they are miners; fossickers would be the better word perhaps. Where they came from originally, I couldn't tell you. Perhaps Pete can."

The cattleman shook his head. "They were on this coast when I got here myself. They're jess two ordinary old fossickers that now and then get tired roughing it, and come in and hut-keep for Garraway. That's all I know about them. Except that they're real fond of each other, and God help the man that makes the mistake of thinking he can hit them one at a time. They eat, sleep, and fight together."

"You forgot to say that they also quarrel abominably," supplemented Jean Salter, laughing. "Of course, they mean nothing by that really. They do it to disguise their real affection for each other. Two such funny old men they are."

"Well, I like Sollum's face," declared Heritage. "I think he would prove a good friend to anyone he took a liking to."

He was rewarded by a look from Peg Adaire. "He would indeed," said the girl. "Don't you remember, Jean, how Sollum and George helped Jim Henry that time he had his legs crushed by a falling spar? Those two old men found him and carried him to their camp on the Sundown, and nursed him back to life as well as any doctor. They'd have done as much for a stranger, I believe. But in this case they owned to being specially careful. And why? because Jim Henry once saved a collie pup of George Judney's when it had distemper."

"There's your outback life for you," said old Adaire. "In the cities men rub shoulders for years without getting near to each others' hearts. Town life cramps a man's affections. His finer qualities are seldom made apparent because the opportunity is lacking. It takes the outback to force a man to live up to what he really is. The open spaces seem to bring out all that's finest and best in human nature. I'm bound to add also that occasionally the reverse happens. It depends I suppose upon the influences at work. You see life is not so mentally strenuous with us. We find more time for moralizing one way and another, and so our actions are freer to follow the natural trend of our thoughts. You would hardly find a stauncher pair of friends anywhere than George Judney and Sollum."

"Why Sollum?" asked Heritage. "Nothing very solemn about his face. There was fun in every wrinkle of it."

Adaire laughed. "Just a nick-name; and spelt phonetically, at that. Where he first acquired it I'm sure I couldn't say. It don't seem to fit, does it? Result of a joke, I suppose."

Pete Diamond and the two girls had disappeared into the kitchen. Presently, however, Peggy Adaire returned. To Heritage's delight much of her former reserve had left her and she addressed him directly for almost the first time.

"Come and tell me how Melbourne is looking, Mr. Heritage. It is quite three years since I last saw it, and I begin to hanker for the flesh pots of civilization. See the disgusted expression on father's face. Here he has been extolling the virtues of the country life and to no purpose. He can't endure the city. Neither can I. But there is no doubting the charm of our capital cities."

"You know them then? Yes, I suppose there is charm of a kind attaching to them. In my case it is not very apparent. I prefer the country. That is natural, of course. It is the fashion to affect a liking for conditions the exact opposite of those we encounter from necessity."

In the pause that ensued Heritage took the opportunity to covertly study the girl's winsome face. He read therein the answer to the strange elation which had seemed to take possession of him from the very first minute of their acquaintance. Peggy Adaire was beautiful. He told himself again and again that he had never before seen a girl so radiant of youth and womanly charm. The piled-up masses of her hair gleamed like new gold beneath the soft rays of the lamp. Her simple dress, cut low at the neck, exposed deliciously the soft white beauty of her rounded throat. Her body, straight and supple as that of a birch, showed at every movement the eager, startled grace of a young fawn. She was exquisite beyond words. In spite of himself Heritage could not avoid mentally contrasting the delicate loveliness of this girl with the more open, sensuous beauty of Winifred Frame.

"I suppose it is too early to ask your impressions of Timber Bend," said Adaire, breaking suddenly into the young man's thoughts.

Peggy looked at the old man reproachfully. "The idea, father. Mr. Heritage has not been in the district twenty-four hours before we begin to bother him about impressions."

"Oh, but I have them, dozens of them," said Heritage eagerly. "Ever since I set foot in Tasmania I have been besieged with impressions of all kinds. My trip up the coast was full of incident. This morning I was even mistaken for a plain-clothes policeman. My welcome lacked enthusiasm as a consequence."

"Oh, but how absurd," said the girl. "You don't look a bit like a policeman."

"Exactly what Pete said," agreed Heritage. "All the same, I can assure you I had an uncomfortable time of it for a while. It lay with Miss Salter and Pete to rescue me and bring me here."

He related his adventures with a whimsical attention to detail. "And really, I'm the most harmless person in the world," he ended with a smile. "I suppose the trouble came about because I failed to announce my rightful calling; which is that of a plain business man attempting to perform a little amateur detective work."

"Detective work? But that does sound very like a policeman, after all."

He was taking mental note of her eyes—deep grey, beneath long silky lashes. Eyes like grey stars, he told himself happily. "I'm the veriest amateur among amateurs," he defended. "No self-respecting policeman would waste a thought on me as a possible rival. You see, Miss Adaire, I am self-appointed to the task. There is a man I must find. I believe him to be somewhere at or near Timber Bend. And so I am come to look for him. I wonder if your father will be able to help me with any suggestions?"

Peggy looked at him a little uncertainly. Again he thought to detect something of wistfulness in her expression.

"If he can, I am sure he will be glad to. Do you know the name of this man you have come to find?"

"It used to be Barkley. As a matter of fact, I'm expecting to find that it is now something else. No one seems to have heard of a man named Barkley on this end of the coast. Probably he has assumed some other name. But I should think it would be easy enough to recognise him. The full name was Peter Philip Barkley. You don't know of any man with that name, do you?"

"I never heard the name before," said Peggy promptly. Something like a look of relief had come into her face. "Then, of course, there are lots of men here whom I have never seen. Father will be the one to tell you. He knows

nearly everybody. Daddy, Mr. Heritage is asking news of a man named Barkley."

It seemed that the old man did not hear the question. He was lying back in his chair, one thin hand held to his eyes as if shielding them from the light of the lamp. The girl bent over him accusingly. "I do believe you're asleep. Are you, dear?" She pulled the hand gently from his face. "Why, Daddy, how tired you look? It's a shame to bother you. Mr. Heritage was wanting to know if you had ever heard of a man named Barkley?"

Adaire looked up at her with the ghost of a smile on his bearded lips. "I was just dreaming, sweetheart. I think I am a little tired to-night. Mr. Heritage, I hope you will excuse me. Old folks, you know, sometimes indulge in retrospection. The less of future this world has to offer us, the more we cling to the past. You asked me a question?"

Heritage looked commiseratingly at the half-averted face of the old man. Adaire's head was sunk forward again on his breast, his two hands clasped before him. He seemed of a sudden to have become very old and tired-looking. The young man's conscience smote him for having bothered the kindly old gentleman so soon with his affairs.

"I had no idea you were tired," he said, apologetically. "My question can very well wait, so far as that goes. It is not of any great consequence just at present. I wanted to know if you could tell me where to find a man named Peter Philip Barkley. He is, in fact, the reason for my trip to Timber Bend. I must find him out as soon as possible."

Adaire repeated the name slowly. He shook his head. "I do not know him, Mr. Heritage. So many come and go along the coastlands that it is impossible to retain a memory of them all. Could you describe this man, do you think? Some trick of speech or manner, perhaps? You have his personal description, of course?"

For almost the first time Heritage began to realise fully the meagreness of his information concerning the man he had come to find. What, after all, had he to go upon? Almost nothing, save the vague rumours of a decade back. For aught he knew Barkley was dead and buried. Yet even so his heirs might still be living. The magnitude of his task confronted him anew.

"I'm sorry to say I have not. Beyond the fact that Barkley comes of good stock, was well educated, and was the personal friend of a man named Moyes, I know nothing

about him. If he is alive now he must be close to sixty years of age. There you have the sum total of my information."

From the anxious manner in which Peggy Adaire was looking at her father, Heritage decided that his tiredness worried her. A sudden dread lest he was outstaying his welcome took hold of the young man. He began to wish that Pete and Jean might come to say it was time to return to Salters. He could hear faintly the tones of the big cattleman's voice in the room beyond.

Adaire spoke again suddenly. "Well, Mr. Heritage, if we can help you at any time we shall of course be pleased to do so. Is it very essential, by the way, that you should find this man you speak of?"

Heritage had long since decided to maintain a strict reserve concerning the details of his business at Timber Bend. Rightly or wrongly he had come to the conclusion that to be too explicit was to lay himself open to imposition. A considerable sum of money was involved in Captain Moyes' bequest; undoubtedly there must be many men unscrupulou enough or reckless enough to impersonate Barkley, if the chance offered. The thought brought a quite unintentional gravity to the tone in which he replied to Adaire.

"It is very essential. Barkley simply must be found. Otherwise . . . . well, the matter goes back some years. I don't fully understand it myself, except that some time in the past certain events happened which seem badly in need of straightening out. Even a tardy reparation is better than none at all."

Heritage uttered the last words almost unconsciously. His mind was busy with his and Colvin's theory that Moyes' bequest to his old friend might be regarded as evidence that the fault, if fault it was, that had parted two such close comrades, lay with Moyes himself.

Adaire did not reply. He seemed, indeed, to have lost all interest in the matter. Peggy glanced at the clock on the mantel; then turned to Heritage with a smile.

"You will wonder what has become of Pete and Jean. As a matter of fact I coaxed them into the kitchen so that they could talk all they wanted to. Father calls me a matchmaker, but I'm not really. It has always been an understood thing that Pete and Jean will marry some day. I'm sure it does no one any harm to let them have a quiet chat together now and then. They don't often see each other. I think I had better tell Pete the time. He has to go back to his camp

to-night, you see. After eleven it will be full tide on the bar and he won't be able to cross."

Later, the girl came with them to the garden gate. For a second Heritage held her firm, cool hand in his own. Then with Jean between himself and Pete they started back to Salters. At the stables the cattleman stopped and held out his hand.

" You'll be all right now, Jack. Maybe you'll let me know if they's any way I can help you find your man."

At the house there was no sign of Charley Salter or his wife. A candle was burning, however, in Heritage's room, and he took it as evidence that the stout man had retired to rest. Heritage tumbled thankfully into his bed. With the extinction of the candle the tiny room was instantly flooded with moonlight. Through the open window came the sweet, earthy scent of the bush. A bird called from the dim shelter of the timber line. The note recalled to Heritage the glorious music of a girl's voice singing across an enchanted vista of moon-swept, fragrant garden.

" Eyes like grey stars," he whispered sleepily. And so dreaming passed onwards into a sound slumber.

CHAPTER VI

ON the next morning Heritage gave immediate attention to his correspondence. He wrote briefly to Colvin, sketching the principal events which had so far attended his journey. A second letter he addressed to the manager of the Bank in Selby, asking advice of the account which Colvin had arranged to open for him there. He began a third letter, this time to Winifred Frame, but for some reason could make no headway with it. In disgust he finally gave up the idea of writing for the present. He could do so later, when his impression of his new surroundings became more settled.

To his delight, Jean Salter after dinner offered to drive him to the Ferry house to see if his portmanteaus had arrived from Green Valley. "We can drive Dandy in the jinker," said the girl. "I have to make the trip, in any case. I want to leave some ointment there for Pete. It's for Pup's feet. Can you drive, Mr. Heritage?"

"Not in this country," said Heritage promptly. "Gracious me, havn't you any roads at all? How you folks manage to keep a vehicle upright when crossing some of this plainland, I can't imagine. My driving has been confined to nice, smoothly-made streets. I'm willing to have a shot at it now, if you insist; but don't blame me if we get tipped out."

"I think I prefer not to risk it," said the girl, laughing. "Broken limbs are too expensive in this country. Our nearest doctor lives a hundred miles away. Now you see how careful we need to be."

"You don't need to hurry," Mrs. Salter called after them, as they drove out of the yard. "I'll see to your father's tea, if he wants to go out again."

Jean waved her whip in reply. As they went along she began to point out to Heritage the different landmarks.

"That gap in the timber to the right of us is where Grey Lagoon runs back into the hills. Over beyond is the cemetery. It's only a tiny one, but not the less sacred for that.

This end of the Lagoon is where Garraway once built a landing stage. He and Frame had an idea, I think, that they could put in a kind of mill race for floating timber to the trucking yard. Evidently it wasn't feasible, since they gave the matter up. The head of Grey Lagoon comes right down to within a quarter of a mile of what they call the twenty-mile on the Government Tramway."

Heritage nodded his interest. "I must get along and see it all, as soon as I can. Do you know, Miss Salter, this timber trade, with its immense possibilities, is beginning to fascinate me. It's a wonderful idea, this pitting of your strength and courage against the big forests. It's a man's life. I know a little of the trade, but not half as much as I mean to learn while I'm right here on the spot. And you say most of the industry is in the hands of Frame and a few others?"

Jean nodded, a faint colour rising in her cheeks. "Do you know what they call Sam Frame along this coast? 'Damn' Frame. That's the name they've given him—'Damn' Frame. There, now I've shocked you. I positively loathe that man, and all those others that play his game. Father says that Frame would rob a hen roost for the timber in the perches. That's his joke, of course. All the same, some of the big timber men are nearly mean enough to do even that. They will not tolerate opposition of any kind. No scheme is too contemptible, no lie too abominable that it will not serve their end against a weaker rival. They drive the smaller man out of business any way they can. I've seen it happen not once or twice, but dozens of times, in this very place. They set a trap for father. But fat and slow though he may look, he knows too much for them. The bait went untouched. But there were others, Tas Perkins, for instance, who were not so lucky. Those hills in front of us are a spur of the Norfolk Ranges. Sometimes you can only see part of them, but to-day the whole range stands out with quite unusual clearness. They say there is a lot of unprospected country hidden away among the gorges over there."

As the trap rounded an arm of the timber the ranges appeared even more distinct. They rose abruptly out of the distance, immense and mysterious, the shadows crowding upon the grey-blue depths of far away gully and ravine, so that the stark summit of the range seemed outlined above a sea of floating purple mist. With each passing cloud a slow ripple of shadow went over the mountains, painting them in

a riot of colour that blended and merged upwards to meet the blue obscurity of the sun-lit sky. Heritage's imagination took hold of him forthwith.

" What a place to explore. Or is it that distance indeed lends enchantment to the view ? A home for all the bush-rangers and bold, bad robbers our youth delighted to read about. You were telling me something about Tas Perkins, were you not, Miss Salter ? "

" Yes. There was a young fellow of that name came here from Hobart three or four years ago. I forget what brought him in the first instance. Anyway, he hadn't been here very long before he saw the possibilities ahead of the timber trade, and made up his mind to go into the business right away. He thought he had as much right to do so as anyone else. He was wrong, of course. It meant wresting away from Frame and one or two more, something which, if it couldn't belong to them, must belong to no one. But Perkins didn't know that."

" If he had been able to raise enough capital he would have been content simply to take up a lease and wait till he could transfer at a profit. Instead of that he decided to market for himself, even if he could only get out one log a week to the tramline. But first he had to find the timber.

" When Frame and the rest heard that Perkins was threading the bush after a timber lease, they simply smiled and said nothing. They thought he was wasting his time. So far as they knew there was no timber land unheld within miles of an outlet to the tram. As it happened, Perkins stumbled by accident on the very thing he was looking for. It was a patch of blackwood shut away by the hills and never so much as suspected by Frame's men. Perkins made a map of the locality and went straight across to Melbourne to see Frame. He didn't know what Frame was, you see. He thought he'd get a fair deal.

" Perkins' only asset was his knowledge of where this blackwood was. Once he parted with this information he was no better than any other man. Frame set himself to worm the knowledge out of him. He questioned Perkins in such a friendly way that the boy quite lost his native cunning. He told Frame what he wanted to know. The rest was easy for a man like Frame.

" Perkins' idea in going to Frame was to get a promise that his timber going out to the mills would get a free run on the tramline. Frame not only promised him this, but he

also offered to send one of his own experts over with Perkins to report on the timber and work out an estimate of the logging expenses. Perkins thought Frame the whitest man he'd ever met. He wouldn't say enough good about him. Well, what happened at the finish ? I'll tell you

" Frame's expert went back with Tas Perkins. They went through the block from end to end. Then Frame's man wrote out his report and handed it to the lad to read. It said that no timber man who knew his business would touch that location at any price. It said that the timber on it was mostly pencil-wood, and that what wasn't was flukey, cross-grained, and full of borer, and advised Perkins to go back home to Hobart and never give it another thought. And because Perkins was almost heart-broken with the disappointment, and honestly believed that Frame's man was giving him a square deal, he did just that very thing. Oh, the shame of it ! "

The girl paused choking ; then resumed more quietly : " That was what Frame was waiting for. He immediately took up a lease of the ground in the name of one of his own men. It proved to be absolutely the finest area of blackwood he has ever marketed. Do you wonder at my hating this man and his methods ? "

Heritage remained silent, chiefly because he had nothing to say in attempted palliation of Frame's behaviour. He thought to himself how Colvin, delving among his dry-as-dust old papers at the office, would have chuckled to hear his opinion of the big timber man so satisfyingly corroborated.

" Well, it certainly looks as if you had got Frame with the goods on him, as the Americans say," he ventured at last. " Did your father tell you, I wonder, that the Frames are acquaintances of mine. I have known them ever since I was a boy."

Jean flashed a quick look at him. " Father never told us that. He talks a lot, but never really says much. He keeps most of what he knows to himself. Well, if you know Sam Frame, you know a bad man. I don't say that to make you feel uncomfortable. One day perhaps you will find out for yourself. Perhaps Frame will let you down more easily than he did the others."

" I've had no business dealings with Frame ; nor am I likely to," said Heritage soberly. " So you see I may steer clear of his rough side."

He had a sudden uncomfortable recollection of his promise

to scout for new areas for Frame. He began to wonder if it would not be safer to refuse point-blank to carry on with the matter. In his heart he did not doubt the truth of what he had just heard. The idea that he might find himself in any way involved in the petty trickery of the timber merchant was instantly distasteful.

The jinker suddenly shot free of the timber and Heritage found himself being driven across the same stretch of open grass-land which he had traversed the previous morning. As they drew near to the Ferry Jean gave an exclamation of dislike.

" Do you see that man standing by the shed ? When I look at him I always get a cold shiver down my spine. Peggy Adaire has the same feeling. She says he reminds her of a snake on the point of striking."

Heritage saw a short, thick-set man watching their approach from the door of the stables. He was too far away as yet to enable his face to be seen clearly, but something in his attitude seemed to chill Heritage. He felt, rather than saw, the long, hostile stare the man sent after them as they turned off to the house.

" Who is he ? " asked Heritage.

" That's Tom Login," said the girl. " He's one of Garraway's section bosses, but sometimes he helps Williams on the ferry. He's a friend of Gus Rebner. I think they are horrible men, both of them. I feel afraid of them sometimes. Pete laughs at me. Of course he is frightened of no one. I wish I had a man's strength."

Jean waited in the jinker while Heritage went to the door of the Ferry house. In response to his knocking a stout, pleasant face girl, with freckled skin and an untidy mass of red hair made her appearance.

" I've called in to ask if there is any luggage here for me ? " said the young man. " My name is Heritage. The man at the Green Valley hotel promised to send the luggage along by one of the teams."

He found the girl's cool, unembarrassed stare a trifle disconcerting. She seemed in no hurry to reply. Her eyes were fixed on the collar gracing his neck, and a little amused twist came to the corners of her wide, good-natured mouth It suddenly struck him that this was the red-headed Venus responsible for George Judney's recent orgy of tea drinking. He repeated his question a little impatiently.

" They's a couple of portmanteys, if that's what you

mean,' said the girl, in a rich, throaty voice. " They come on Garraway's horse team last night." She looked beyond him, and a smile came on her face. " Why, if it ain't Jean Salter that drove you along.' She raised her voice. " Ain't you coming inside, Jean ? "

Jean waved her hand in reply. " Not now, Sadie, thank you." she called back. " We only came for Mr. Heritage's luggage and to leave a little parcel for Pete. Is your father well ? "

" Middlin'. Well, if you won't, you won't. Just a minute, Mister."

She went inside, presently reappearing with a portmanteau in each hand.

" They's two shillings to pay. You staying at Jean's place, Mister ? '

" For the time being, I am," said Heritage politely. " By the way, here is the parcel Miss Salter wishes to leave for Pete Diamond. Will you see that he gets it ? "

" Why, certainly." She looked at him curiously. " Ain't thinking to jump Pete's claim, are you ? " Her gaze wandered to the jinker. " Not that I blame you. She's a turrible good girl, is Jean."

" Jump Pete's claim ? I'm afraid I don't understand you," said Heritage, in some bewilderment.

The red-headed girl continued to regard him with bland amusement. " I mean you ain't aiming to spark Jean, are you ? I sort of wouldn't, you know, if I was you. Pete's mighty jealous at times."

Hardly knowing whether to feel angry or amused Heritage returned to the jinker. In the end he surprised Jean Salter by breaking into a hearty laugh.

" Won't you share the joke ? " she invited enviously.

In a spirit of mischief Heritage complied. " The young lady answering to the name of Sadie, evidently thinks I stand in danger of getting my head punched," he said. " She warned me not to try to make eyes at you. She regards you as Pete's especial property."

" The idea ! " exclaimed Jean, the warm blood flooding her cheeks. Her sense of humour got the better of her. " How dare you repeat such dreadful nonsense, Mr. Heritage ? " she asked, beginning to laugh frankly with him. " It is too absurd. Sadie is delicious. Nothing seems to discourage her habit of speaking her mind. You see for yourself how embarrassing it is at times."

" There's Login," said Heritage, as they drew near to the sheds again. " Could we pass him a little more closely this time, Miss Salter ? I've a fancy to see his face ? "

As it happened the request was unnecessary. At sight of them the man walked slowly across the paddock in front, so timing it as to bring himself within a yard of the track as they passed. He also, it seemed, wanted a closer inspection. At any rate, he halted and turned directly towards them. Heritage caught his eyes for one fleeting second, then they were by him and out of sight among the bushes.

" Rather a tough-looking customer, I should say," commented the young man, thoughtfully. " His eyes seemed to bore right through me. Have you noticed the length of his arms ? He looks like a gorilla. He must be tremendously strong."

Jean repressed a shiver. " He is. I've seen him wrestle and throw a yearling bull unaided. I simply can't bring myself to tolerate the man. And yet I know no actual harm of him. It's only that he gives me an impression of something indescribably evil. I've always felt the same way about him. Pete laughs at me and says I'm too imaginative. Perhaps I am. I wish I could think so. Yes, Login and Gus Rebner are friends. You seldom see them apart."

" What do they do here ? " asked Heritage.

" They are Garraway's men. They each have charge of a falling gang. Sometimes they come along here to help Williams at the ferry. I don't know what the arrangement with Garraway is."

" Well, I don't suppose I shall have anything much to do with either of them," declared Heritage, thankfully. His tone might not have been quite so confident had be been able to look into the future. " I've my own business, and I mean to stick to it. Your father this morning suggested I should call and see Garraway. He says that nearly every man on The Bend, with the exception of the cattlemen, are on Garraway's pay roll."

" Say Frame's pay roll," amended Jean, a little spitefully.

" Frame's pay roll then. In any case I have to call on Garraway before I go home. I have a message to deliver from Frame."

Jean looked at him curiously, but refrained from questioning. Heritage fell into a brown study. To admit his interest in Frame's avowed intention to grab still more timber land around The Bend, might be to renew those suspicions of

himself which had happily been dispelled by the friendly intervention of Pete Diamond. The more he considered his present relation with Frame the more uneasy he became. A kind of indignant resentment began to grow within him at the knowledge of the big timber merchant's unprincipled methods. He came to a sudden resolve to write to Frame and disclaim any intention to proceed with his promise to aid in the further discovery of timber country.

Jean Salter broke in on his thoughts with a little laugh. " Day-dreaming, Mr. Heritage ? Come, that's a poor compliment to the scenery ; or even to me ! Goodness, you do look so solemn."

Heritage made swift apology. " My rudeness is unpardonable. Please forgive me. Do you know I was thinking it strange that Frame and the others should always manage to carry matters with a high hand. Surely there must be some way to dodge their trickiness. What is the real stumbling-block, do you think ? "

" Want of capital," said the girl promptly, " Honest hard work has no chance whatever against unscrupulous wealth. Father had tried time after time to find someone plucky enough to stand behind him but he never could. I suppose people are frightened to oppose such big interests as those belonging to Frame."

" I know. He told me a little about it," said Heritage, pathetically. He relapsed into silence once more. To his surprise he was conscious of a distinct feeling of dislike towards the timber people—selfish, grasping, money-worshipping rogues ; timber wolves, as Charley Salter had called them. He felt that he wanted to try his wits against Frame and the rest of them—fight them and beat them. The idea took hold of him tremendously. Why not, indeed ? If Salter or some other would discover the land, it should not be such a very hard matter to find a decent financial backing. Surely his and Colvin's names were good for something. In the light of what he had learned there could be no question of his committing a breach of faith against Frame. In any case, he intended to write to the timber man and recall the promise he had given so innocently.

He was roused for the second time by Jean's voice, speaking in mock despair. " You're quite hopeless, Mr. Heritage. Have you no social obligations at all ? "

" Consider me beyond redemption," said Heritage, reddening with keen self-annoyance. " What a boor you must

think me. My only excuse is that you have so thoroughly interested me in this timber business that I can hardly think of anything else. I throw myself on your mercy and promise not to offend again. Miss Salter, do you think that your father still holds to his idea of taking up a timber lease? Do you think he would go ahead with the matter if the capital were found to back him up? Mind, I'm only curious. Still, I might be able to help."

"I quite understand," said the girl; quietly, yet with a sudden sparkle in her eye. "Mr. Heritage, I believe my father would give ten years of his life to be able to fight Frame and beat him. To buck the timber ring and come out on top is his one ambition. He says it can be done. Pete says so too. But they *must* have enough money behind them. Also, they need absolute faith in the men they would have to be associated with. There must be no question of their loyalty. It must be impossible for Frame to buy them over. Given the right conditions, both father and Pete are certain of success."

"And you, what do you think?" demanded Heritage.

Jean looked at him with a curious widening of her eyes. "I think exactly as they do. Oh, I'd help . . . I'd do almost anything to beat those wretches at their own game. Of course, the chance can never be ours."

"I suppose not," said Heritage.

Ahead of them appeared Salter's house, the iron roof glinting white in the rays of the declining sun. Beyond rose the timber, silent and motionless, the epitome of grim inexorable strength. Within its mysterious confines lay a fortune for the taking. Yet the conquest would not be easy.

"No, I suppose not," repeated Heritage. None the less, his thoughts were active.

CHAPTER VII

GARRAWAY'S camp lay two miles south of the Adaire's home. It was built on a slight rise elbowed in by a sharp curve of the Bat River as it swept out of the timber country to the level of the plains. The buildings were of hardwood boards cut from the bush around. The roofs were of iron, thus lessening the danger of fire in the summer time. A little apart stood a long, barn-like structure which served as an eating house for the men in the wet season. Therein also was the cook's sleeping quarters. Still farther back on the edge of the clearing were two long lines of tents. A small creek trickled almost within stone-throw.

Garraway himself occupied a two-roomed hut at the head of the mill line. He used the front room as a kind of office ; the other was fitted for his sleeping quarters. Generally he fed with the men over at the big hut. Here he set the seal of his aggressive personality more firmly upon them. He listened to their talk, watched the play of their features, studied each man apart from his fellows till he gauged something of the real character hidden away beneath habit or mannerism. In all this he had a purpose. There were times when it became absolutely essential to the maintenance of authority that he should understand the psychology of the crowd that owed him paid allegiance. To ensure this he had need to study his men, to distinguish their strong or weak characteristics in such a manner as to be instantly able to determine how far threat or cajolery might serve his end. There were times when only the fear of his personality saved him from disaster at the hands of some hard-case, suffering real or imaginary resentment. Garraway drove his men hard. He went his way outwardly unconcerned, yet with all his senses alert for signs of a discontent that might foster personal malice against himself. He missed no single detail of the day's work, speeding from gang to gang with tireless purpose ; coaxing, exhorting, threatening by turns ; sparing neither himself nor others so long as they might accomplish

the estimated haulage for the day. As he went he made mental note of each man's capability, his willingness for work, his power of endurance under rush-work conditions, his popularity with the other men ; above all, the tone of his temper and conversation, his allegiance or otherwise to the company of which Garraway was the immediate head. By these means he was enabled to weed out from his gangs those whom his judgment warned him were incompetent or antagonistic. By degrees he gathered around him a little band of men hardly less capable or unscrupulous than himself.

At rare intervals Garraway spent long days at his office, poring over area maps or figuring estimates with a note book and stub of pencil. On mail days he divided his time between attending to correspondence and talking over the telephone to his agent at Sun Port. Those days he was usually unapproachable ; yet occasionally it happened that the progress of the work justified his indulgence in unwonted relaxation. Then he would light his pipe and talk to all and sundry, his big, booming voice full of a sneering good humour.

The fortnight following Heritage's arrival in Timber Bend, Garraway sat in his office checking quantity reports. He was a big man, with full fleshy face and thick neck. His mouth was wide and blubber-lipped, his nose large, his eyes large and prominent. As he worked he spoke from time to time to Login, who sat smoking against the open window of the room.

Presently Garraway laid his papers aside with a grunt of relief. Opening a drawer of his improvised desk he fished out a letter and began to busy himself with the contents. As his reading progressed a slow smile over-spread his heavy features. He looked across at Login like a man well pleased.

" Come here a minute, Tom."

The section boss rose to his feet without comment. Seen at close quarters his squat body and abnormally long arms were even more suggestive of animal strength than Heritage had imagined. He was clean shaven, his face having a curiously mottled appearance. His eyes, like Garraway's, were large, and abnormally wide-set ; so much so, indeed, as to give a peculiar impression of squinting. His head was covered thickly with coarse brown hair.

Garraway kicked a soap box towards him. " Sit down, Tom. I got something funny to tell you. Mail brought a

letter from the old man. What d'ye think he wants to do now ? "

" Raise our wages, eh ? " growled Login. " Damn it, he could well afford to, anyhow. Them big bugs are the meanest things this side sheol."

" They've got to be," said Garraway, the shadow of a smile loosening the corners of his mouth. " Things are cut that fine in the market nowadays that expenses have to be kept down to bed-rock."

" Well, what's he writing about then ? " asked Login, suddenly. " Putting on more hands ? Ain't the work fast enough for him ? "

Garraway referred again to the letter in his hand. " He don't say. What he's after now is more country. Seems to think this lot won't last for ever. What do you say ? "

" Say ? Hell . ." Login spat disgustedly. " Ain't he a whale for wanting things ? You or me would never think of half of them. Ain't he got all the country as it is ? Frame makes me sick."

" Not quite," said Garraway, carefully. " Frame has most of the timber area, I grant you ; but it seems there's still an acre or so left over. Fat Salter claims he knows of a bed of hardwood, anyhow. Frame put the acid on him too quick and scared him. He shut up like a clam. Now Frame's trying to work the oracle through a third party. It seems a young chap named Heritage is coming to these parts on some business of his own. The boss counts on making use of him in such a way that he won't get wise to a thing."

A flash of interest came into Login's eyes. " Heritage, you said. I guess he's here now. Been here a week or more."

" How d'you know that ? Seen him ? "

" Saw him driving with Salter's girl," said Login. " Regular city suit case. Wears a clean collar. I knew he was coming, anyhow. Gus ran against him at Hennessy's. He don't know a thing."

" Who don't ? " asked the manager sharply.

" This Heritage. We're in for a time, all right. Quite a little picnic breaking him in. Seems like he's got on the silly side of Pete Diamond though."

Garraway laid a thick finger on the desk. His face wore a kind of uneasy frown.

" Now there's a man I don't understand ; and you can take it from me I don't say that of many men. I never

did quite get the hang of Pete Diamond. Just how much does *he* know, I wonder."

" He don't know nothing," asserted Login, contemptuously. " He may think he does, but he don't. Anyway, you don't need to let yourself get scared. You know how Pete stands with the police. Sort of crawling round on a good behaviour ticket, ain't he. I can fix him any time. Anyhow, it wouldn't pay him to get in dirty with Frame. You can take it that Pete's all right."

" I hope he is—for his own sake," said Garraway, coldly emphatic. " Now about this young chap Heritage ? Listen what Frame writes me : ' I'm fairly certain there's still timber land unheld south to west of the Bat. If there is, we must have it. There's a young friend of mine named Heritage means crossing to your district in a day or two. I've told him to look you up. He carries a map (or what he supposes to be a map) of the leased ground on The Bend. I've told him to find out just what ground there is left over, and make a quiet note of it. If no one talks too much, he'll do it. He's that sort of a man. So long as you soap him well he'll slip on to anything you like to ask him. Keep your mouth shut when he's about, and see none of the boys get gay with him while he's working for me. Afterwards, you can have all the fun you want.' "

Garraway folded the letter and stowed it carefully away. He shot a meaning look at Login, who was grinning evilly. " You get that last chorus of the old man's ? Well, see to it. Frame don't like Heritage over much. That's plain. But he's got to keep sweet with him while there's a chance of using him. No, he don't like him. Maybe he was trying to spark the old man's daughter. Some class, that girl. I met her last time I was on the mainland."

Login continued to grin. " I'll go to the wedding, Slum. All right . . . I must have my joke. You don't need to get cross-eyed. Now this man Heritage ! . . . I don't mind telling you I've took a kind of dislike to him. He's a whole lot too fancy looking to suit me. All the same, I don't think he'll scare easy. Gus tried it on him but he wouldn't shoo for grapes."

" What's he look like ? " asked the manager, carelessly.

Login rose to his feet and stuffed his pipe into his hip pocket. " Why, he's this sort of a looking feller and that sort of a looking feller. I'd hate to have to hit his baby face, it's that clean and pretty looking. He's . . ."

His gaze had wandered to the open window, and he paused suddenly and began to point with a long sinewy fore-finger. " If you look to the left of the crane there, you'll see him for yourself. He's coming this way. They's a woman with him."

Garraway looked quickly in the direction indicated. " That's Miss Adaire," he asserted. He failed to remark the interest on Login's broad face at the mention of the name. " I reckon Heritage is coming to see me, and the girl offered to show him the way. So that's Frame's stool pigeon, is it ? He's no slouch to look at, anyhow. If his wits are as smart as his body looks, the old man will get a slap or two before he's finished."

Garraway turned to his foreman with a sudden resumption of his authority. " You better clear out of this, Tom, before they get here. I reckon that'll be about all I wanted you for. And mind you don't get talking among the boys. Time enough when I give you the tip ! "

Login moved away grumbling. " Me talk ! " he called back over his shoulder. " I'll be getting a wife, maybe, one of these days. I reckon she'll do enough talking for the both of us. I'm no newsagent."

He stepped outside on to the boardway just as Heritage and the girl reached the door. Standing back against the railing to let them pass, Login favoured them with a long impudent stare. His wide-set eyes held a curious light. There was something disgusting in the way he licked his lips and spat on the ground.

" Well, he's a hell of a fine feller with the wimmen, ain't he ? " he mumbled to himself, as he turned away." Salter's girl one day, and her the next. Maybe we'll see."

On the entrance of his visitors Garraway had risen to his feet. His big, fleshy face showed nothing but friendly interest. In response to Heritage's introduction of himself, he held out his hand frankly.

" Mr. Frame wrote me to expect you, Mr. Heritage. I'm glad to see you. Miss Adaire, I'm sorry I haven't a more comfortable seat to offer you, but this is bachelor's hall, you know. And how's your father ? "

" I don't know, Mr. Garraway," said the girl, doubtfully. " He seemed so much improved until about a week ago, but now he's as restless as ever. I think there is something worrying him." She was silent a moment ; then asked, " Are you very busy just now ? I suppose you are."

Garraway seemed amused. "Busy! Well, just a little perhaps. We don't growl though. It's what we're paid for . . . to be busy. There's no room for slackers in the big timber." He turned and looked at Heritage. "What's your idea of things?"

"I think you're right," said the young man. "The very nature of your occupation seems to forbid idling. The work is too strenuous and exacting, I should imagine, for any but physically fit men. It's a daring task, this fighting the big wilderness. Even I can imagine the fascination of the thing. Only that my lines are cast in other places, I could relish leading the sort of life you do here."

Garraway looked at him curiously. "You think so! Well, maybe you might. What about the rough side, eh? What about the sheer hard graft; and never knowing when a log might roll on you, or a scrouge catch you, or a cable break and saw your body in half? What about the hard beds and the still harder tucker? Or the chance to get your face pushed in by some tough from down under? How does that fit the picture?"

Heritage laughed good-humouredly. "I'd be willing to chance all that. I suppose others have to go through the mill. If they can, so could I. If I fell down on the job, I'd try not to growl too hard."

Garraway's face showed no amusement. "It's not likely you'll be tried out, anyway. As you say, this ain't your job. From what Frame says, you're only making a little business trip. Having a look round, eh? I'm not asking your business!"

Heritage exchanged a smile with Peggy. "You must hear a little of it, all the same, Mr. Garraway. Because I kept my own counsel too closely when I first came to Timber Bend, someone intelligently mistook me for a policeman and took a pot shot at me."

The manager looked politely inquisitive. "Is that so? And you were not a policeman, after all? Too bad!"

"I'm glad you think so," said Heritage, dryly. "I can tell you my business in a few words. I've come to look for a man named Barkley. Do you know the name?"

"No," said Garraway bluntly. He added, after an interval of silence, "No, I don't. You need more than a name to track a man with in country like this. They're mostly income tax dodgers hereabouts. They take a fresh name with each job. What's he look like, this man Barker?"

"Barkley, you mean. I can't describe him, unfortunately. He will be close to sixty years, I should say. He is well educated and has been to sea in his younger days. That's all I can tell you."

"It's hardly enough. He's old, and he's been a sailor. I can find you a dozen men would fill that bill. What sort of a job did you leave to go chasing wild geese? Why, if you know no more about your man than what you've told me, you'll save time by catching the first boat back to the mainland. Not that I want to lose your company so soon, of course."

Behind the manager's banter ran a strain of malice. Heritage felt it and flushed resentfully.

"I've plenty of time on my hands, if that's what is troubling you," he retorted. "I'll admit, if you like, that the prospect is not very hopeful. At the same time, one can but do his best. And I've got an idea that Barkley is right here where I expect to find him. Call it intuition, if you like."

"And when you do find him?" queried Garraway, indifferently.

"He can tell his own tale," replied Heritage, more pointedly, perhaps, than the occasion demanded.

If Garraway noticed the snub he did not show it. He turned to Peggy Adaire with a smile.

"You'd like a cup of tea, eh? Miss Adaire. Of course you would. Now I wonder if you'd mind giving your own orders? You'll find George Judney and Sollum over at the big hut. Will you tell them to put the billy on, or shall I?"

She looked at him gratefully. "I am thirsty for a cup of tea, Mr. Garraway. Don't you bother though. I know how busy you are. I'll run across to the hut myself, and coax Sollum to make tea for us all."

"Count me out, if you don't mind," said Garraway, still smiling. "I'll send Mr. Heritage after you though, in a minute or so. Well, goodbye, Miss Adaire. Sorry your father isn't as well as he might be."

When the girl had gone Garraway addressed Heritage abruptly. "I'm reminded that Frame said something in his letter about you doing a little commission for him. He told me all about it, Of course, it's quite a simple undertaking. We know there is still unoccupied territory, but neither Frame nor I have the time to look it up. That being

so, he naturally turned to you. Being friends, he knew he could rely on your promise to help."

Heritage hesitated. "I did promise something of the kind. To be quite frank, however, I don't exactly see what I can do. If you folk right on the spot don't know of any timber location, what sort of a show do you think I would make in the way of land finding? I don't even know the survey marks when I see them."

For all his seeming heaviness Garraway was quick-witted enough. "So! If that means anything, it means that you don't mean to go ahead on the job. You're going back on your promise to Frame. Why?"

Heritage met the manager's gaze squarely. "Mr. Garraway, I hate beating about the bush, so I'll say this. Since I came to Timber Bend I've learnt things that have changed my view point entirely. If one half of what is told me is true, then the big timber men who hold control of the industry along this coast should be hounded out of business. I can understand fair business rivalry. I can even understand unfair business rivalry, provided it is confined to an equal advantage on both sides. Then it's a case of Greek meeting Greek. What seems incomprehensible to me is the attitude of the big established firms towards the outsider who dares to market timber on his own initiative. No need to tell you what happens to him. By fair means or foul the ring (for I begin to believe *there is* a timber ring) breaks him. Not more than a few hours ago I was told something of the circumstances connected with a man named Perkins. You see I can offer concrete illustration of what I complain about. Do you pretend to offer any excuse for Frame's conduct towards that man? I tell you, Mr. Garraway, that a more flagrant example of business Kaiserism never happened. And I'm a lawyer by profession, remember, and fully used to meeting evidence of shady transactions. The whole thing seems to be so petty, so mean, so uselessly cruel and tyrannical. Nothing can excuse Frame's behaviour. That is the reason why I refuse now utterly to associate myself with any attempt of his to further add to the timber holdings he already possesses."

Garraway's eyes seemed to narrow. "You're raising a storm in a tea-cup. There can be no sentiment in business, Mr. Heritage. You ought to know that. The timber game is like any other money-making concern. It's a fight from start to finish, and God help the other fellow. If an out-

sider butts into the play he takes his chance of getting hurt. I know all about Tas Perkins. He got what was coming to him. I say that deliberately. You're basing your conclusions on incomplete evidence. You've probably had the facts misrepresented regarding what you do know. For a lawyer you show very narrow judgment. The trouble is that you're looking at this thing from the wrong end. Turn it round and squint the other way and most likely you'll see facts coming to meet you."

"I'm more likely to see self-respect vanishing round the corner," retorted Heritage. "There may be truth in what you say. I don't profess any particular ability as a lawyer, anyhow. Your criticism is beside the question. I'm arguing this thing from the point of view of an ordinary decent citizen, who has enough humanity in him to resent the barefaced robbery from his kind of any attempt to better himself. The thing is grossly dishonest."

Garraway's patience was not proof against this. He sneered openly in reply. "I see. 'I was born of poor but honest parents,' and all the rest of the common cant. As a matter of fact, the boot is on the other foot. We (for I count myself in this, and damn glad to do it) are after all the business we can get. Our methods are no better or worse than anyone else's. We've had to fight for what we have, and we've got to keep on fighting to hold on to it. We want to keep on climbing. And we're honest enough to admit it. If you saw your way to grab into the game you'd do it tomorrow." He snapped his thumb and finger towards Heritage. "That much for your sing-song piety. It's a case of sour grapes. You ain't much of a lawyer, after all."

"You said that before," said Heritage, sharply. "I'd like to hear your idea of why not!"

The manager shrugged his shoulders. "I thought a good lawyer took sides with the biggest money. Well, you know your business best. I suppose you've fixed it with Frame, eh?"

"I've written to him declining to act, if that's what you mean. I could hardly do less. In a way I'm sorry to disappoint Mr. Frame, but it can't be helped. I hope he sees my point of view."

Garraway grunted, but made no other response. Heritage got slowly to his feet. "I mustn't take up any more of your time. I can see you're anxious to get ahead with your

work. Goodbye, Mr. Garraway. Glad to have made your acquaintance."

"Goodbye," said Garraway, shortly. He turned his back and began to busy himself with his papers.

Heritage left the room with a distinct feeling of relief. He was inclined to blame himself for the unfriendly turn the conversation had taken, yet reflected that it was just as well to make his position clear. He had an uneasy impression, however, that Garraway would misrepresent what he had said when reporting the conversation to Frame, as he was bound to do.

"I seem to have suddenly contracted a habit of unpopularity," he muttered ruefully, as he made his way across the uneven ground towards the big messhouse. His depression did not last long. A sudden burst of girlish laughter coming from the building ahead made him grin sympathetically.

"What a girl that is!" he thought swiftly. "To think of her sweetness being buried in a place like this. It's a rotten shame. And yet Adaire thinks the world of his daughter, that's certain. He wouldn't keep her in this God-forsaken place without a reason. Well, it's none of my business. Peggy Adaire! And she's as pretty as her name. Jack, my son, you're getting sentimental."

Peggy was seated at the board table, a huge pannican of steaming hot tea at her elbow. Her face was alight with laughter as she talked to Sollum Joe, who was peeling potatoes into a kerosine tin.

"Joe, you're fibbing horribly! Do you really want me to believe that the reason you are not married is because George objected?"

"Send I may die, Miss, if it ain't so!" Joe's roving eyes fell on Heritage standing in the doorway, and he ceased abruptly.

Peggy greeted the young man with a friendly wave of her teaspoon. "You are just in time for some afternoon tea, Mr. Heritage! You've met Sollum already, haven't you? And this is George Judney!"

Heritage found himself shaking hands with a tall, boney man of about fifty, whose body and limbs seemed to be all nobs and angles. A pair of mournful brown eyes regarded him from out of a perfect wilderness of eyebrow and whisker. When Judney spoke his voice appeared to issue from his interior in a kind of drawling rumble.

" Good day to you. Sort of warmish, ain't it ? Minds me of the time me and Bill Hardie was camped in the Mallee. I disremember jess what year that was exactly, but it don't matter. Take a seat."

Peggy made room for Heritage on the bench beside her. He looked in some dismay at the huge pannican of tea handed to him by the grinning Sollum.

" Gracious, I'll never be able to drink all that ! " he exclaimed. " This mug must hold a couple of pints ! "

The girl laughed. " Well, I'm in the same fix. We can only do our best. Oh, I was quite forgetting something. When you came, Sollum was going to tell me why he and George have remained bachelors. Now, Joe, please ! We're all listening beautifully."

The little man appeared a shade embarrassed. He rolled a doubtful eye at Heritage, who nodded encouragingly.

" Go ahead with the yarn. Don't mind me ! I say, though, did you make these soda scones ? You did ? By Jove, I never tasted better in my life. Can I have another, please ? "

In response to this artful flattery, Sollum's hesitation vanished in a grin that seemed to meet at the back of his head.

" Why, you see, it was like this. Me and George one time was carting firewood for the butter factory at Glen Arden, and they was a feemale used to wait at table over at Sandall's boarding house where we put up week-ends. Every time me and George saw that gal we got worse tangled up in our minds. I tell you she hailed from down south where I was born, and every time I looked at her it was like opening a letter from home. I thought a whole heap of that gal's kind opinion. George here was jess the same. Most every time she'd come and ast what he would have to eat, George would curl up and mighty near bust with self-congratulation."

" ' If Bill Hardie could see me now,' says old George, every little while, ' I wouldn't call the queen my aunt. Did you see Amalia's eye admiring of me, Sollum ? ' says he. ' Wimmen go mad when they see my face,' says George. ' I must have been married a thousand times only I hadn't the heart to disappoint the other nine hundred and ninety-nine.' "

" Who was Bill Hardie ? " asked Heritage.

Sollum's faded blue eyes regarded him compassionately. " To think you didn't know that ! Why, he was a friend of George's, I reckon. Now, as I was telling you, me and George

gets that way at last, that we can't look at one another without wanting a funeral. Says George to me one day, 'Joe, this is the first time a feemale has introduced the knife of distension between you and me. They's no need for it. She can't marry us both. I object to you being Amalia's husband for three reasons—you've got no money to keep her in comfort, you can't afford to maintain her as she'd orter be, and you're not rich enough to support her. Besides that, you'r too old. You're nearly old enough to be dead. Fer you to marry that girl would be like Father Christmas espousing a baby in arms. 'When I marry Amalia Peters,' says George, 'you can hit the track on your lonesome and keep on going till you bust right into the middle of the Great Southern Pacific Ocean. I'm through with you,' says George.

"'Not so,' I tells him. 'If that gal marries anyone, she marries me. What she wants is a husband, not a quarantine home for rheumatic germs. She marries ME. But I'll tell you what I'll do, jess to show they ain't any selfishness about us. We'll let you come round to the house now and again, and sit on the verandah and listen to the kids call you gran-pa.'"

"'Will you toss up for her?' says George. 'Sudden death, and my own coin, and I will!' says I. We finds a penny and tosses her up. And there you are!"

Sollum's recital ended abruptly. He lifted the tin of potatoes from the table and swung it on the iron crane above the fire. From his seat in the corner George Judney looked on mournfully.

"But you haven't finished!" protested Peggy. "Which way did the penny fall? Who won the toss?"

Judney's hollow voice volunteered the information. "Why, Miss Peggy, you see Joe's kind of forgot to tell you that. It was this way. They was a crack in the decking of the culvert where we was standing when we tossed. That penny went through it like a flash of light and we ain't seen it since. Maybe it fell heads; and then again, maybe it fell tails. We dunno!"

"And you let it go at that. You never tossed again?" asked the girl, incredulously.

"Why, no! You see it were sudden death," explained Sollum, gravely. "It's kind of worried me since that we fixed it that way. We ain't seen Amalia since. I often wonder how she bore up under the blow. Wimmen is such turrible creatures to worry."

"Is all this true, or is it not?" demanded Peggy, looking from one old man to the other. "You just love to tease me. I don't believe there is such a person as Amalia Peters, or whatever you call her. George, how is your rheumatism? Shall I send you some more liniment? Mind, it's to rub yourself with, not to drink."

Judney regarded his partner with sour disfavour. "So Sollum's been spouting again, has he?"

Joe grinned uneasily. "She ast, or I shouldn't have breathed a word. Ain't that so, Miss Peggy?"

"Now don't start quarrelling," admonished the girl, laughingly. "We must be going soon, I think. Thank you so much for the tea and scones. They were beautiful; weren't they, Mr. Heritage? And how is Snowy getting on, George? He was such a tiny, groggy-legged mite of a calf the last time I saw him."

"Now there's a animal, if you like," said the lank hut-keeper, with melancholy pride. "I disremember ever seeing a better looking calf in all my days. He's doing fine, Miss. 'Member when they first brought him in?"

The girl turned to Heritage. "Snowy is George's pet calf, Mr. Heritage. Some of Sanderson's men found him on the run by the side of his dead mother. She was only a heifer, and a stranger on the coast. She bogged herself in a winter creek and somehow broke her neck. So far as the men could see she was a clearskin; no one seemed to know who had owned her. They brought the calf along to the camp here, and turned it over to George and Joe."

"Follers George around like a cattle pup," said Sollum. "To see it you'd kind of think George was its mother. The jolliest little cuss I ever helped poddy."

"What did you feed it with?" asked Heritage. "Did you have plenty of milk?"

"This ain't a dairy farm; it's a mill camp," said Sollum. "Did you never hear of hay tea and a drop of oil? We put him out on the grass at Quigley's farm last month. It's been kind of lonesome ever since he went. That calf was better company than a barn full of funny men from the circus. They weren't more'n half my Sunday pants left when they took him to Quigley's. Snowy had eaten most of 'em. I never see such a whale for eating other folks clothes. Ain't that so, George?"

"True as death!" Judney corroborated plaintively. "I ain't blew my nose for more'n a fortnight. 'And why?' says

you. Because I ain't had nothing to do it with, since Snowy eat up the linen press the day before he left ; that's why. The insides of that busted calf must have been like a bargain sale at a draper's. I want to go shopping every time I think of him."

Peggy shrugged her slender shoulders in comical despair. " These men are utterly shameless, Mr. Heritage. Did you ever hear such nonsense as they talk ? Well, goodbye. Be sure and let me know if you want any more liniment, George ! "

" And how did you get on with Mr. Garraway ? " she asked, as they went across the yards. " Was he able to suggest a way to find the man you want ? "

" I'm afraid we didn't hit it off too well after you had gone," confessed Heritage. " I wonder if you would be interested to know just why it was. You see when Mr. Frame heard that I was coming here he asked me to do my best to find out if there was any timber land still untouched on Timber Bend. I agreed. Since landing here, however, I have learnt a little of the methods adopted by the big timber firms towards possible rivals. I can't rid myself of the belief that Frame and the rest of his kind have too large an interest in what should really be a national industry, fostered by the Government in the interest of the whole community ; not, as it is now, owned and controlled by a little group of greedy capitalists. In any case, the ordinary man in the street should have equal right to benefit, provided he has the courage and the skill to compete with those already in the trade. Yet what actually happens ? If an outsider dares to enter the game he becomes a target for the trickeries and rogueries of the trade. It appears that way to me, anyhow. I've tried to disbelieve what I've been told, but I cannot. The thing is only too true. A new man is given no chance. He's bludgeoned out of his business with no compunction whatever. It makes one's blood boil."

" I'm glad you're coming to see the injustice of it," said the girl, quietly. " If you can feel as you do on such a slight experience, what do you suppose must be our indignation against the methods of the big firms ? Yet we can do nothing. Did you tell Mr. Garraway what you thought of things ? "

" I'm glad to say I did. He was inclined to make the matter a personal one, I think. He was very curt at parting. Miss Adaire, I can't for the life of me see what Frame could

have expected me to do for him. It could be only by the merest chance that I might discover unoccupied territory. Did Frame count on his luck aiding him to such an extent as all that ? I can't believe it. He had some definite plan ; though what it was I am unable to say."

Peggy looked at him thoughtfully. " Mr. Heritage, I don't believe that Frame ever expected you to personally locate timber land. It would be absurd to think he did. You may think it uncharitable of me, but I consider it more likely Frame counted on you becoming friendly with certain people here, gaining their confidence (quite innocently though it might be) and thus acquiring what information they had. For instance, Frame might have thought it likely you could find out from Mr. Salter where his little patch of timber land is. Both Frame and Garraway have tried to trick Mr. Salter into an admission, but he is too clever for them." She broke off, exclaiming suddenly, " Why, how white your face has gone ! Is the heat too much for you, Mr. Heritage ? Shall we rest in the shade for a little while ? "

The concern in her voice thrilled Heritage pleasantly, albeit he was then experiencing a sense of shame and indignation which literally overwhelmed him. Not for an instant did he doubt that the girl's guess at Frame's motive was the correct one. The thought galled him intensely. what a contemptible, spiritless creature must Frame have taken him for, to suppose him capable of being used in such a dirty manner. Actually then it had been intended that he should worm the confidence of Salter and others, under the guise of friendship.

" It isn't the heat that troubles me, Miss Adaire. I believe your estimate of Frame's intentions is correct. It's not very pleasant for me to reflect on the opinion he must have held of me to dare think I would consent to act in such a way. Do you know that I've known Frame ever since I was a youngster ; yet never once did I guess him to be the kind of man that he is. Even now I can hardly realise him capable of such a brutal violation of friendship."

They proceeded in silence for a little way. When Heritage spoke again his indignation was not so evident. He glanced at his companion almost apologetically.

" I'm a bear, Miss Peggy. See how ill-tempered I can be. And yet can you wonder at it. I wouldn't lift a hand to serve Frame's end, even if he went down on his knees to ask

me. I'll tell you what I mean to do though. I'm going into the trade here in opposition to him. Does that startle you? It sounds a wild boast, but I'm quite in earnest. Why not, if it comes to that, and supposing me to be in the slightest degree capable? I've taken back my promise to Frame. What little confidence of his I possess, was forced upon me. I can see nothing dishonourable in doing as I propose. Can you?"

She flushed a little at the earnest appeal in his voice and eyes. "No, I cannot. For Mr. Frame to exact a promise from you as he did, was grossly dishonest. You owe him no allegiance whatever. Oh, Mr. Heritage, please be careful in what you do. So many have tried to 'buck the ring,' as Pete Diamond calls it, and failed wretchedly. I should never forgive myself if any word of mine tempted you to make an error of judgment. And yet, how glorious it would be if we could win through."

Heritage laughed with restored good humour. This coupling of her name with his, as it might be, though doubtless quite unintentional was, nevertheless, delightfully suggestive of the friendliness between them. With such a girl as this allied to his interests, what might he not accomplish.

"Don't worry, Miss Peggy. I've got an intuition, or whatever you like to call it, that we shall give Frame all the trouble he wants if he tries to bully us. I think we are in for a hard fight, in any case. Of course, the idea is, so far, no more than a suggestion. It will depend a great deal on what Mr. Salter, Pete, and your father have to say." He laughed again, as a thought occurred. "I'm in danger of losing sight entirely of my real reason for coming to Timber Bend. I've been here a fortnight, and what have I done to find Barkley? My partner in Melbourne will begin to growl very soon. Good old Colvin; his bark's a good deal worse than his bite."

After he parted with Peggy at the gate of her home, Heritage resumed his way thoughtfully. Charley Salter greeted him with the announcement that Mrs. Salter and Jean had driven to Green Valley and were not expected home till late.

"Reckon we'll have to grub for our own tea," lamented the stout man perspiringly. "Well, they's plenty of cold victuals. How'd you hit it with Slum Garraway? Get your corns trod on?"

On Heritage relating the events of the afternoon, Salter looked serious.

"Gosh! you ain't really meaning to have a shot at Frame, are you? Why, they'd skin you alive."

The young man's chin went out obstinately. "That remains to be seen. You'll think that I've come to this decision pretty suddenly. So I have. I've given you good reasons for so doing. Mr. Salter, you said once that you'd give a great deal to enter the timber trade. If you really meant that, here's your chance. If you or Pete can find the timber I'll do my best to raise sufficient capital to keep our heads above water. We can take Mr. Adaire in with us and go even shares in the venture. I'll admit that we shall have to go very carefully. The whole thing will need to be thought over before we stir a hand. Well, what's your own idea? Have we a chance?"

The stout man's eyes were glistening. "One in a hundred; but I'm game to take it. It depends mostly on whether you can find us enough ready money to hang on to our leases while we fight the local ring. It'll be some fight. If we slip past them here, they'll come at us in the open market. They's no dirt on God's earth that Frame and his crowd won't come at. You want to understand that before you start. It'll be a fight to a finish."

"I suppose so," said Heritage, soberly. "Well, I should say that we four will take a lot of scaring. It will be mostly a question of capital, after all. And I'm tolerably certain that we can get plenty of backing. Tell me something about local conditions, timber values, and so on. Of the practical side—your side of the business, I know nothing at all. If I'm to be of any help, except financially, I need to learn all I can. Supposing we decide right away to take up a timber area, what conditions are absolutely essential? Go into detail as much as you can.

Salter sat his chair in frowning silence. It was evident he was thinking deeply. Heritage lit one of his few remaining cigars and passed his case across to his host. The stout man helped himself abstractedly. Presently he began to speak.

"I figured out long enough ago jess what I'd do if ever I had the chance to market timber against Frame. Here's the way of it. Find out what the building trade wants and then give it to 'em. Well, can we do it? Can we give them the kind of timber they want, and at the price they're willing to pay? I say we can."

He ruminated once more, chewing heavily on the butt of his unlighted cigar.

"We grow two kinds of wood here that are gradually pushing aside the imported timber when it comes to a comparison of price and general utility. Folks are beginning to find out that our hardwood makes as good studs, scantlings, and boards as they could wish for. They ain't any need to get hollering across the sea for what grows right at our own back door. What do they use our hardwoods for? Pretty near everything in the line, don't they. Stringy-bark for floors, studs, furniture, and so on. Blackwood for furniture, and staves for the coopers' trade. What ain't our hardwood fit for? They're even using it in the mines now in place of Oregon and Douglas Fir. I've seen more than one tender calling for stringy-bark, messmate, and mountain ash. Granted they're heavier than the Oregon and Fir, and not so pliable, what does that matter. Look at the price of the different timbers. Look at the quantity of our own sort. The imported stuff shouldn't have a leg to stand on. It gets me why folks didn't wake up sooner to the value of their own forests, here in Australasia.

"Well, they's no doubt they's plenty of hardwood to be got on The Bend here. Can we market it? What's it going to cost to get it out of the bush? And how long will it be before we get our first returns to hand? Can we hang on till then?"

"That will be my part of the business," said Heritage. "I don't foresee any great difficulty about financing the venture. There must be any amount of folks on the look-out for a good investment. It will be up to me to find some of them. Now tell me this. Isn't there any amount of hardwood on the mainland? How can we compete from here? It isn't as if we were well established, with a good connection to work on. And then again, how does the price of our stuff compare with the imported? Price is a fair leveller of distinction, you must remember."

The stout man laughed easily. "Don't let that worry you. We've a big margin in our favour. For instance, Oregon flooring costs about £2 per hundred super; our flooring, runs to about 16s. a hundred lineal. You don't want to take much notice of what some of the firms are doing. It's a kind of game that's being played, with the public going 'he' the whole time. They're forcing Japanese oak on the market now at sevenpence a foot. Our hardwood can be

got at threepence a foot. Compare them prices for yourself.

"Take your other question about the timber on the mainland. Let me tell you that what they grow over there ain't up to what we've got here, for value. The Tassie hardwood wears best; they's fewer gum veins in it. Another thing, we season our stuff in the stacks a lot more than they season their's across the water. No, Mr. Heritage, our biggest difficulty is going to be getting the timber on to the market. We'll have to go slow, and keep expenses down to bed-rock. My own idea is to open with Blackwood and follow along with the other later. If we can get a contract for staves for the barrel trade, we ought to do well enough to put up a small mill of our own. We can get staves for 10s. a hundred at the stump. The present price on the market is from 48s. and upwards. It won't take anywhere near the difference in them two prices to freight the staves across the water."

"How about the cost of our lease?" asked Heritage.

"They's the survey fee—say £30 per thousand acres. Then they's the government royalty on the timber we take off. I don't jess remember what the hardwood is, but for Blackwood it runs to 15s. a hundred super. Them things are trifles though. It's getting the stuff out that's going to be the trouble. How are we going to land in to the government line? We can't use Frame's tramway, that's a certainty."

"No waterways we could make use of? Couldn't we lay some sort of a light tramline later on?"

Salter got up from his chair ponderously. "We might use the Bat River to raft staves down as far as Grey Lagoon, but there we'd stick. This thing is going to take some thinking out. We'll talk things over more fully after tea. As for laying a line of our own, they's small chance of it. They's got to be a bill through Parliament before they'll let you do that."

"Frame got his. Why can't we?" objected Heritage.

"Because we ain't got the pull, that's why. Goodness me, I don't get no thinner, do I? Well, once we get to holts with Garraway my flesh ought to work loose all right, all right. None of us'll need to stand in the same place for more'n a minute at a stretch then, or Garraway or someone 'll try to carve us in half with a band saw. You made your will?"

" A nice question to ask a lawyer ! Not only have I made my own will, but I also helped to draw up Frame's. It's about the only bit of business he ever gave me."

The stout man sighed pleasurably. " I ain't one to take notice of omens, but that certainly looks good to me. Maybe you'll help bury him one of these days. I'm going inside to lay the tea. We'll talk some more about this."

He stumped away, and Heritage was left gazing out across the paddocks. The sultry heat of the day had given place to a cool change from the west. There was more than a hint of rain in the air. Even Heritage, unversed in such matters, sniffed the savour of it in the freshening breeze. Nor were other signs of a rough night lacking, had he been able to read them aright. Bands of black cockatoos flew overhead, screaming harshly as they made their way inland to the shelter of the timber. From afar sounded the dull thunder of the breakers on the bar of the Bat River. From the ground right at Heritage's feet a cricket chirped suddenly, shrilled, and died to silence.

The stout man thrust his head through the kitchen window and volunteered grumblingly, " They's a storm coming up. Thought the weather was too fine to last, anyway. Hear them frogs on the swamp there ? Sure sign of rain that. Well, let her come. You don't happen to know where Jean stowed them cold doughnuts, eh ? No, I thought not."

He disappeared once more and Heritage heard the rattle of tea-cups. He went along to his room with a thoughtful face.

CHAPTER VIII

AT the first sign of rough weather Pete Diamond made hurried inspection of his tents. He drove the tent pegs still deeper into the ground, tested the guy ropes, and cleaned out the gutters. Then from a little heap of kindling wood he carried enough under cover to last a couple of days. His harness he stowed away on a pole swung below the ridge of the second tent, covering it with bags as a further protection from the damp. He knew from experience that the driving sleet, which invariably accompanied a south-westerly squal, had a trick of finding its way through the most carefully constructed shelter.

At one end of his sleeping tent was built a bark chimney. Here Pete lit a fire and swung a couple of billies. Pup, the kangaroo dog, lying by the side of the bunk, watched the proceedings of his master with grave understanding eyes. At Pete's call he rose and padded softly up to him. The soreness of the dog's feet had quite gone. As if boasting of the fact he raised his fore-paws from the ground and rested them on Pete's knee. The cattleman laughed gently.

"She's a wonderful girl, ain't she, old dog? Fixed them raw pads of your's better'n any vet. She thinks a whole heap of you."

He took Pup's head between his two hands and looked whimsically into the steady brown eyes.

"That's jess what she does for me too, Pup. Heals me when I'm all sore and nasty. Why, a man jess couldn't go wrong with a girl like her watching him and loving him. I dunno why she does—a mean quarrelsome cuss like I always been. She does though. And me and you are going to show her she ain't mistaken about us, ain't we? We're going to be kind of good and respectable, so far as folks 'll let us. And listen, they's no one on God's earth is going to hurt her the least mite, while me and you are around to watch her. Not that they's any fear of it. They'd be no

one mean enough to try and hurt a good girl like Jeannie. If they was, God pity them when you and me found out."

The dog dropped his paws to the ground with a little whimper. His big, luminous eyes never left the man's face. It seemed he understood perfectly each word that his master uttered.

Outside the wind was steadily rising. Presently there came a gust that set the canvas walls bellying madly. It passed on, and a few heavy drops of rain spattered overhead. They too ceased. In the momentary lull which followed, the pounding of the waves along the foreshore sounded increasingly menacing. Pete rose from his seat and tied the flap of the tent securely in place. First, however, he scanned the blackening skies with anxious gaze.

" It's going to be a bad night, Pup. Wind's gone right slap-bang round to the south-west since mid-day. That surf on the coast means surf enough by morning to smother a house." He threw a pinch of tea into one of the spluttering billies and swung it off the flame. Dipping out a cup of the liquid he set it aside to cool. Then, reaching down a couple of mutton chops from a bag safe swinging from the tent pole, he speared them on to the prongs of a gum stick and began to grill them over the fire. When they were ready he dropped them on to a tin plate and settled himself to eat.

As the meal proceeded Pete began again to talk to Pup in the half musing, wholly earnest manner of his kind. He had the bushman's habit of talking aloud to his animals ; a God-given habit which has preserved the sanity of more than one lonely soul deprived, by circumstance or necessity, of the companionship of his fellows. From time to time Pete threw scraps of the food to the dog, who sat on his haunches by the side of the bunk, his ears pricked expectantly. In the dancing light of the fire the short, copper hued coat of the big animal gleamed like burnished gold.

" They's them that say a man that's fond of dogs and horses most always is cruel to women. You and me know that ain't so. It's one of them things folks repeat without bothering to know what they're saying. Where would you find bigger pals anywhere than you and me, eh, old boy ? Yet both of us would die a thousand times before we'd do or say even the tiniest mite to make Jeannie sad. Ain't that so ? They's some men now, Frame maybe, or Slum Garraway, or Rebner and Login, that you wouldn't trust too far. We don't like them four, eh ? We know what they

are. Rebner and Login now—they ain't a man between the two of them. Only we got to keep in with them a little while longer because they ain't anything else we can do. Once we shake them off though, we're going to hit a trail of our own, you and me and the little girl. Them fellows are bad right through to the wish-bone, ain't they? Watch 'em out, old dog!"

The animal raised his head with a low, deep-chested growl Pete laughed, but seriously. "That's right, boy. Talk to 'em that way and they'll leave you alone. They's many Christians ain't got half the sense you got. You remember them fellows I jess told you of. They ain't friends of ours—or Jeannie's."

Pete dropped to the ground beside the dog and threw an arm about the slender neck.

"We got to be able to tell our friends from our foes, ain't we? We know what Garraway and his crowd are. But they's Jeannie and her mother and dad. I can hear your tail go flop every time I say the little girl's name. If you was ast jess why you done that you couldn't say, old man, but I can tell you. It's because they ain't anyone in all the world that loves you as much as Jeannie does . . . unless maybe it's me."

Pup's growling had ceased. He turned his head and tried to muzzle the big hand that rested on his shoulder. Pete pulled his ear playfully.

"You know it. And they's Peggy Adaire and . . . listen, Pup, we got a new friend maybe. This Jack Heritage don't seem half a bad sort. Jeannie likes him, and I reckon you can't go better'n that. They ain't anything in the world so sure of the truth than the instinct of a good woman. What's ailing you, old man?"

The dog was on all four feet, sniffing at the air uneasily. At the words he ran to the door of the tent. Suddenly he stiffened and his whine changed to a rumbling growl.

The cattleman rose to his feet and threw a quick glance around the tent. Apparently satisfied, he resumed his seat by the fire, his eyes fixed on the flap of the tent. Pup answered his call reluctantly. Pete put his hand carressingly on the alert, beautifully balanced head.

"That ain't your stranger bark, old boy. It's someone coming that you know. You don't like him though. If you could talk, you're that cute I believe you could say his name before you seen him. Well, if he's bound this way

I suppose we'll soon know. It ain't a night to be out in, any way. Hear that? They's someone hollering out!"

He went to the door of the tent and threw open the flap. As he did so a form loomed out of the darkness and came to a pause. At the sound of Login's voice the dog broke into a threatening snarl. Pete caught him swiftly by the scruff of the neck and held him so, pressed against his knee.

"That you, Pete? River's up and the boat line's all busted to glory. I thought maybe I could make them hear at the punt, but you can bet that old Williams ain't listening a night like this. I seen your light and come along for your bottle horn. Tie that damned mongrel up, can't you. He hates the sight of me."

"Don't try to kick at him then," said Pete, shortly. "As for Pup being a mongrel, you can take it from me, you ain't half as good a man as Pup is a dog. Why ain't you kind to animals? They's not a brute at the Ferry that don't snap at you when you pass."

Login had pushed past and was now crouching in front of the fire, his dripping hands outstretched to the heat. He was wet through and shivering with cold. In the dancing light of the flames his big, flat face showed an expression of sullen rage, and his squinting eyes glinted viciously.

"You might be a parson, the way you preach. I hate dogs. I always did. Anyhow, they's no need to get snake-headed about it."

Pete tied the still snarling dog to a rail of his bunk before he replied. True to his new-found control he bit back the sharp retort which sprang to his lips.

"They's no sense quarrelling, Tom. How'd you come to be along this way on such a night? I thought you was back with Garraway!"

"I been along to Elbow Ridge," said Login, grumblingly. He stood upright and peeling off his dripping coat held it against the flames. "I rode up there after dinner to-day, and turned my horse loose in the angle by the south wall. When I come to get him again the brute had trod down the rails and gone. I followed his tracks near as far as Pung's Crossing; and then I see the storm coming up and made back home."

Pete had resumed his seat. He pulled a clasp-knife from his pocket and began to shred some plug tobacco.

"That was hard luck. Them rails want fixing again. We'd better see to it. What took you to the Ridge? Seems

to me when they's all this talk of the police, that it ain't over wise to give anyone a line on to what's doing."

He filled his pipe slowly and lit it with a burning twig. When he spoke again his tone was more thoughtful.

" I ain't over easy the way folks come around now-a-days. Well, it don't trouble me much, after all. This season sees me out. Here, Pup, you set right there on your feet. They ain't no one going to hurt you. Down, old boy."

Login was squinting at him curiously. " You're meaning to pull out then ? I hear some talk of it before, but I ain't believing it. And now you say it yourself."

" You got any reason why not ? " asked the cattleman easily. Before his steady haze Login's eyes fell away.

" I don't give a curse what you do. They'll be the more for the rest of us."

" I'm real glad you see it that way," said Pete, with the ghost of a smile. " All the same, if you take my advice you'll drop the whole business. They's nothing to it."

Login twisted his face round with a sneer.

" Turning religious, ain't you ? Well, you know you're own business best."

" I reckon I ought," said Pete. The gibe passed him by harmlessly. Twelve months back his volcanic temper would have tempted him to swift resentment, yet now he smoked on unmoved. Only the dog tied to the bed-rail, sensing the antagonism in Login's tones, whined uneasily.

The big cattleman watched the play of Login's coarse features with a little amused smile lifting the corners of his fine mouth. He read this man like an open book ; knew every twist and turn of the cruel brain behind the flat face ; understood each shifting movement of the wide-set eyes. He knew just exactly the reason for Login's growing carelessness to avoid offence, the studied insolence of his manner, the almost contemptuous curtness of his speech. Because of Pete's yielding to the redeeming influence of his love for Jean Salter, his patient curbing of those qualities which had made him feared and respected by such characters as Rebner and Login, in answer to the unspoken wishes of this girl who had come into his life, his standing with the wilder spirits along the coast had weakened sensibly. They no longer stood in awe of his great strength, his swift unreckoning punishment of aught that offended. Knowing nothing of the real reason for the change which puzzled even the cattleman himself, they had come in time to believe that his man-

hood was weakening to the growing insolence of their always resentful recognition of his authority.

Strangely enough the knowledge disturbed Pete but little. With the strong man's contempt of his foes he cared nothing for what the future might bring, trusting to his strength and resourcefulness to defend himself and his friends should the occasion arise. That trouble was brewing he felt instinctively. Now that he had come to see things with Jean Salter's eyes he could not forbear a smile of pride to note the absolute sureness of her judgment. He remembered the very words she had used to describe Login and his friends.

"It isn't as if they *had* to be bad, Pete," she had said. "If you know what is meant by environment, you can only admit that we could wish no better spot than this from which to draw something of the love and charity of life into our own hearts and minds. Surely none could be better placed than we, right here on nature's playground, with everything about us sweet and clean and beautiful, just as it left God's hands; none of the crowding and bitterness of the cities, the dirt and squalor of existence that leaves its mark upon us in spite of all we can do; nothing but fine open skies and sweet-smelling heather, the music of the birds, the sighing of the wind among the great trees, the fresh, clean scent of the earth. Oh, Pete, how beautiful it all is! And at night, when the plains are flooded with darkness and quiet, and only the rustling of the bush and the far-off murmur of the sleeping ocean comes to remind us of the world around, how near we seem to understanding what God really intended us to be. No, Pete, these men are better served than most. They act as they do because they are mean by nature, so mean that they hate a decent action for its own sake. No one could go their way for long without being the worse for it. Gus Rebner and Login—yes, and Garraway, for all his better education and opportunity, are like that. They would sell your friendship to-morrow, if the devil bid high enough."

Pete's smile grew wonderfully tender as he listened to the echo of her words. Bless the little woman, how she loved all that was good and clean and beautiful. How even her very thoughts had power to purge the grossness from him and bid him seek the deeper meaning of existence. How often would she cry to him, when as yet he had not learnt to understand the exquisite unselfishness of her passion for right doing: "Clean hands, Pete; always with clean hands.

What can anything matter so long as we can say that when the end comes. Purple and silk can hide foulness unspeakable, but rags have graced many a saint. Riches there are, and power, and wisdom ; but happiness can only come of a clean and contented heart."

Login had been staring moodily at the fire. Now he rose to his feet with a muttered oath at the rain still beating steadily on the canvas overhead.

" I reckon I won't wait any more. Lend me your bottle horn. I'll leave it for you by the windlass this side."

" You won't bunk here ? " asked Pete, quietly.

" With that brute of a dog free to sniff round me all night, you bet I won't. I don't mind a loan of a bluey though, if they's one to spare.

He resumed his half dry coat and slipped into the bluey which the cattleman handed to him silently At the door of the tent he looked back a moment.

" Get rid of that damned dog, will you ? Well, solong ! "

Pete stood awhile looking after him as he went squelching away into the darkness. Then he fastened the flap of the tent and threw loose the cord about Pup's neck. The dog had not offered to move on Login's departure, nor had he growled. Pete saw, however, that the hair on his nape was slightly raised and his teeth showing in a kind of fixed snarl. The big fellow patted the animal affectionately.

" Feeling bad, eh, old boy ? He ain't a man's bootlace, but you and me ain't telling him so jess yet, are we ? Not quite ready, eh ? But one day soon we're cutting loose, ain't we, Pup ? Lord, listen to that. They's another squall coming up. They'll be some way on the river to-morrow, if this lasts."

In this Pete was right. When he turned out next morning the rain had certainly ceased, but the lowlands were flooded and well-nigh impassable. He found Tick and Tack standing disconsolately on a knob of high ground overlooking the swamped pasture. With a little manœuvring he caught Tack and leading him back to the tent saddled up carefully.

All the morning he rode up and down between the sandhills, turning off here and there into the hollows in search of bogged cattle. He found one such on the edge of a lagoon, bogged to the tail in a thick, slimey quicksand. The poor animal turned big pitiful eyes on him as he rode cautiously up. For a little time he laboured to release it, yet knowing

all the time that his effort must be fruitless. In the end he unsheathed the skinning knife on his belt and pithed the animal with one skilful, downward stab. Before he rode on again he noted in a little book the colour, brands and markings of the dead beast for reference to his owners.

For three years or more Pete Diamond had been in charge of this portion of the coast run, which was leased from the Crown by a syndicate of butchers down south. From it, in the spring, more than a thousand head of cattle were mustered, put across the Bat River in drafts of a hundred, and travelled by easy stages to the fattening paddocks on the hills above Green Valley, there to qualify for the requirements of the market. At mustering times the owners themselves invaded the runs. Then, for days at a stretch, the quiet coastlands echoed to the sound of cracking whips and bellowing stock, and the hoarse persuasions of men and dogs. Between whiles, however, Pete rode his range unaccompanied save by Pup, who came of a breed not adapted for working with cattle. The big kangaroo dog spent most of his time on the hunt, speeding tirelessly across country after his quarry until he had achieved a kill, or driven it within range of the shot-gun which Pete occasionally carried with him on his rounds.

About mid-day the cattleman topped the crest of a long knoll overlooking portion of the still churning beach. One glance was enough to show him that the sands were impassable. He had indeed already guessed as much, yet wished to be certain, so that he could turn the cattle inland as he went, driving them free of the dangerous portion of the coast before night-fall.

To Pete the aspect presented by the foreshore immediately after a south-westerly gale was nothing new. For all that, he could never quite escape the fascination of the sight. From where he sat his horse the ground dropped steeply away to the fringe of stunted, wind-blown tussocks marking the beach proper. On ordinary occasions one could see well beyond the stretch of gleaming sand that ran to meet the grey-blue ocean whose waters swept the horizon. Now, however, the beaches were hidden by a dirty, pock-marked foam that rose and fell with every motion of the angry tide. Far as the eye could see the foam lay piled along the shoreline, climbing the scarred walls of the sandhills and thrusting fingers of yellow spume into the nooks and crannies of the rocks. In places the foam was fifteen and twenty feet deep ;

a blanket of shuddering grey evil that masked the treacherous quicksands underneath. For a day or more it would hold thus, sinking reluctantly inch by inch to the pressure of the wind and the incessant drag and slurry of the tide, until the shore became clear of all but a thin, soapy film through which the white and yellow sand gleamed dully. Not until then might it be safe for the passage of man or beast ; for the ever-shifting debris sucked downwards in a giant's grip, the while it span a devil's wreath of twisted seaweed about the gasping body of its victim.

Pete Diamond's eyes leisurely followed the curve of the coastline to where a faint blue line of white showed against the dark underground of the hills on the further side of Pung's Crossing. At that point the beach narrowed to a mere thread of pathway, and the tea-tree swamps crept down to the very edge of the ocean itself. In fine weather the passage was sound enough. Even after a heavy squall it was sometimes found to have yielded nothing of its firmness. Yet one could never be quite sure. There were times when Pung's Crossing turned into a thing of horror, a fimbriated film of opalescent beauty spread thinly above a hell of churning slime. Because of its vast treachery the place was shunned except at times of desperate emergency. For the most part men followed the west coast track by the longer yet infinitely safer route through the timber at the head of the swamps. Pete Diamond was one of the few having intimate knowledge of Pung's Crossing. Since it marked the western limit of the run he had frequent occasion to visit the spot, and grew in time to learn something of its moods.

This time, however, he did not approach it. Instead, he turned off inland until he reached the plains and there rode the fence line looking for breaks in the wire. About three in the afternoon he returned to camp. A surprise awaited him. Pinned to a wall of the tent was a scrap of paper. The cattleman grinned a little to recognise the sprawling characters of Charley Salter. The note was brief.

" I come to see you about the first time in two years," the stout man had written, in plaintive strain, " and bust me, Pete, if you ain't away from home. Jean says to come right along jess as soon as you can. They's something doing, but I ain't to say what it is. She'll tell you herself. By gum, and didn't the storm hit things up last night ? They's hardly enough left of the Ferry cable to tail a whip. I got Sadie Williams to row me across in the dingey. You'd best

do the same. I'm leaving you a horse at the Ferry house. P.S.—She says to be sure bring the dog."

Pete's black eyes sparkled with pleasure as he read. He called to Pup. "Me and you has got an invite, old man, that I wouldn't swap for a pass into Guvm't House. We'll clean up right away. Now ain't that a girl, eh, to know we was feeling lonely and hand us out a smile-raiser like this? The animal barked excitedly and the big cattleman laughed. "I b'lieve you understand most every word that's said to you. Well, let's go ahead with things."

A little later he set out for the Ferry landing, Pup following soberly at heel. The punt was moored to the home bank. Pete could see that the cable was intact, in spite of Salter's melancholy assertion to the contrary. At times the stout man's prefervid imagination got the better of him and he lapsed into unashamed exaggeration.

The river was running a banker, but there was a comforting absence of driftwood upon its broad, swift-flowing surface. Pete hunted about till he found the bottle horn which he had lent overnight to Login. In answer to the long, booming notes that he conjured from out its hollow interior, the flutter of a skirt showed suddenly amongst the bushes beyond the far landing. Pete cooeed and waved his arms. In response Sadie Williams came to the edge of the water and stood thus a minute regarding him. Then with a little gesture of recognition she climbed on to the punt and, slipping free the strap which held the windlass, began to wind the unwieldy craft across the stream.

"Punt's harder to manage, but a good deal safer than the dingey in a sea like this," panted the girl, five minutes later as Pete and the dog stepped on to the foot-board. Sadie's face was scarlet from exertion. As she spoke she let go the handle of the windlass and sat flat on the decking. "I reckon you can wind yourself back. I ain't paid for this sort of thing."

The cattleman smiled his thanks as he began his task. "I know, I know, Sadie. I jess hate to trouble you like this; but I had to cross somehow, and they's no getting near the bar. Where's all the men folk got to. This ain't a girl's work. What's your dad doing that he ain't on the job himself? Sick, maybe!"

Sadie shook her red head angrily. The tone of her voice was unaccountably sullen. "Sick! Not he. He's never sick. If you want to know why he ain't here, it's because

Samphrey crossed his cattle the day before yesterday and the old man's gone to Green Valley to cash his cheque for the ferry fees. They's precious little of it'll come my way. And look at me. Ain't I a scare-crow? Ain't I to have things like other girls now and again? God knows, don't I work hard! And him down there at Hennessy's boozing the money I help earn."

"Who's at the Ferry house to-day?" asked Pete, his eyes fixed steadily upstream in search of drift upon the spinning surface of the river. "You ain't left alone?"

"They ain't no one but me," said Sadie wearily. "Leastwise, unless you count George Judney. What he come along for I dunno. He jess sits there in the kitchen and drinks tea and don't say two words. My, what a fine dog Pup's getting!"

She reached out her hand and patted the animal's shining back. Pete smiled contentedly.

"He's a oner, ain't he?" His eyes suddenly twinkled with mischief. "Gosh, Sadie, if big Tom Login drops in some day and finds Judney sitting there alongside of you, they's liable to be some fun."

The girl tossed her head, but seemed not displeased.

"Him! A fat lot I care about Login. Don't be silly, Pete. Anyhow, if it comes to that, watch out for yourself. They was something in pants come driving along with Jean Salter the other day. I tells him you ain't wanting no deputy."

For a moment the cattleman eyed her blankly. Then a grin of understanding came on his face.

"Oh, you told him that, did you? I'm obliged, Sadie. Only, you see, they weren't really any need for it. They's nothing doing there. That man you seen was Jack Heritage. He's boarding with the Salters. I ain't a bit jealous."

Sadie looked at the big fellow wistfully. "That's the funny part of you, Pete. You ought to be one of the jealous kind, but somehow you ain't. You and Jean means marrying one of these days. That ain't anything uncommon for young folks to do. What I don't understand is the way you two believe and trust each other. You don't neither of you worry; you seem to understand each other naturally like. They ain't no doubt nor meanness between you. It must be terribly happy to . . . to be like that."

Pete made no reply for a minute or two. The cable had jammed a trifle and he was busy setting it right. As they neared the bank, however, he looked up and said slowly:—

"Why, yes; so it is. I couldn't understand things any other way though. If you ain't trusting now, what would it be like when you was married. Where you love you trust. And it's only common sense after all. You jess *got* to trust, ain't you?"

"Yes, I suppose so," answered the girl, dully. She seemed of a sudden to have become even more listless and dispirited.

Pete hesitated in frowning perplexity. There was something here that he did not understand. Manlike he blundered.

"It's that ways with you and Login, ain't it, Sadie?"

To his dismay the girl showed evident signs of distress. Her face went white and her lips trembled. She did not reply.

The cattleman made the punt fast to the landing and silently helped Sadie ashore. He was feeling strangely uncomfortable. As they climbed the cattle drive the girl laughed a little unsteadily.

"I reckon the river made me feel sick like. It does sometimes. You . . . you don't need to take any notice of me."

The pitiful attempt at composure only served to heighten Pete's wondering compassion. On the crest of the rise he halted and laid a hand kindly on the girl's arm.

"You know best, Sadie; only it kind of come to me jess now that you was in trouble. If that's so, you ain't going to forget your friends, are you? They's nothing you could ast that I wouldn't do gladly. Can't I help you? What is it that's worrying you? Won't you tell me?"

She shook her head mutely, the pallor of her face yielding suddenly to a flood of crimson. Before Pete's eager, friendly gaze her eyes fell away almost ashamedly.

"Sadie! . . . won't you let me help?" repeated the big fellow, gently. He added quickly, "Or Jeannie? It takes a woman to help a woman. I ain't meaning to butt in where I ain't wanted, only it sort of hurts me to see you like this. Maybe you ain't well?"

The muscles of her throat quivered. "They ain't nothing wrong," she said, in a low voice. "I . . . I reckon I won't trouble you or . . . or Jeannie. It's just that I'm kind of . . . silly, to-day. Maybe I'll be laughing again, when the . . . morning comes."

Pete sighed and dropped his hand.

"Well, you know best, Sadie."

" They's a horse behind the shed that Charley Salter left for you to take " said the girl tonelessly. " I'd have give him a feed, only you know they ain't any chaff left. Garraway's bullocks had it all."

" That's all right," said Pete. " I guess you don't need to let that worry you. You're turning off here, are you ? Well, goodbye, Sadie. Maybe a lie down would do you good. You don't want to be over-working yourself."

He stood for a moment looking after her, a puzzled frown on his big strong face. Finally he said aloud :

" Well, I reckon she ought to know that me and Jeannie's her friends. Maybe it was only the river after all "

At the door of the Ferry house he ran into George Judney. The lank hut-keeper's greeting left nothing to be desired. His brown eyes took stock of the young man with a kind of mournful admiration.

" What are you doing along here, George ? " asked Pete.

Judney continued to look at him steadily. " Me ? I'm . . . I reckon I'm here on a bit of business. Kind of rejuvenating my innards, as you might say, against Sollum's everlasting dough-balls and swill. That man's cooking would annoy a wart hog." He hesitated a minute, pulling at his whiskers. " You ain't seen Sadie around now, I suppose ? I sort of thought I would ask her to make a little billy tea before I left."

Pete laughed outright. " She jess fetched me over on the punt. She'll likely be along in a while. You want some tea, do you ? Why, from what I can make out you been scoffing tea for the last half-day. Your inside must be about pickled already."

" Well, they ain't nothing he-haw about," said the hut-keeper, aggrievedly. " I jess ast you, that's all. If you was to have to swaller the hog swill that Sollum serves up as tea, maybe you'd guess at my inmost feelings."

" Why don't you cook for yourself then ? " asked Pete sensibly.

Judney snorted.

" Maybe I will, one day. They's no denying Joe's got his good points, but cooking ain't one of them. And yet, if you'll believe me, that man thinks they ain't a soul on the coast that can hold a candle to him that ways. Where you going, Pete ? "

" To Salter's," said the cattleman. He eyed Judney thoughtfully. " How long are you and Joe going to work

for Garraway ? Given up the prospecting altogether ? Well I don't blame you for that. They ain't much in the game, if you ast me."

Judney was looking towards the timber as if wondering if it was worth his while waiting any longer for Sadie and the tea which his stomach craved. Apparently he decided not, for he heaved a cavernous sigh and began to adjust his swag upon his shoulders.

" We're staying with Garraway till we quit. Maybe if my rumaticks weren't so bad we'd get busy right away fossicking again. As it is, I reckon we'll stay where we are for awhile. Well, I'll be getting along. If I ain't home by dark that old fool Sollum will be getting sort of scared. He's as fussy as a hen with chickens."

Pete hunted around till he found the horse Salter had left for him. As he rode away he found himself beginning to speculate anew as to why Jean had sent for him. Not that the reason could matter very much, after all. He was far too satisfied at the prospect of seeing her again to worry over the probable cause of her request. He was, indeed, much more concerned to account for the queer behaviour of Sadie Williams. In a way Pete was fond of the girl. In spite of her rough ways and almost mannish impudence, he knew her to be warm-hearted and steadfastly honest ; altogether different, in fact, from what one might reasonably expect, taking into consideration the circumstances of her upbringing. Besides, did not Jeannie own to being fond of her. That in itself was sufficient to enlist the cattleman's loyal friendship.

One thing puzzled Pete greatly. He could not account for the red-headed girl's evident liking for Tom Login, a man he distrusted utterly. Thinking now of the squat section boss he began to ask himself if it was possible that Sadie's trouble found relationship there. Had Login been ill-using her, he wondered. The thought stirred him to swift anger. He called down to the dog racing alongside :

" They's a day of reckoning for us all, they say. I ain't over and above sure how I'll come out of it myself, but I tell you, Pup, if Login don't act square by Sadie he'll get his all right, if I got to swing for it afterwards."

As he rode up to Salter's house he saw Jean standing by the gate and waved his hat with a yell of greeting.

" You're nothing but a big, overgrown schoolboy, Pete Diamond," called the girl laughingly. " Anyone would

think we hadn't seen each other for years, the absurd way you go on. Well, sir, and what have you got to say for yourself ? "

The man's black eyes softened curiously as he looked at her. " What have I got to say ? Why, that you're agetting more beautiful to see every time I come along. Beautiful and good, Jeannie. I sort of wonder sometimes if I ain't jess dreaming you . . . if I won't wake up one day and find you gone. It ain't understandable . . . you to love a man like me."

She shook a finger at him in mock displeasure.

" Fibs, Pete ; cruel fibs. I'm not beautiful, thank goodness. I'm not even passably good looking, and you know it."

" You are. To me you're the most beautiful thing on earth," Pete exclaimed eagerly. " Jeannie, you won't ever let anything come between us. You're the only bit of God that I ever knew."

" Oh, boy, hush ; don't talk like that. It isn't right. Beside, you're forgetting your mother."

His hand went to fondle the thick masses of tawny hair that rested against his shoulder.

" I won't say it if it hurts you, Jeannie ; but you can't stop thinking it. My mother's only a memory. I never knew her really. But you I do know. Jess you and me together for always. They ain't a thing else in the world that I could want. Them words Peggy sings sometimes—you know the ones I mean. Why, that song might have been made up to order of you and me. Sing it, girl."

" Pete, how absurd. You know I haven't any more voice than a cow. Why, when Mr. Heritage heard the noise I was making that morning in the clearing, the poor fellow looked frightened to death."

" Say it then," he commanded, wrapping a huge arm about her waist.

She shook her head tantalizingly. " I've forgotten it ! "

" Well, then I will," said Pete.

He began to recite ponderously :

" Lilac and honey-flower,
White skies and blue ;
All the world's a lover's bower,
And naught to rue ;
Just to laze the perfect days—
We two.

Grey eyes and tender eyes,
Red lips and sweet;
All my heart's a paradise
Here at your feet;
To attest love confest—
Complete.

Jean broke into silvery laughter. "Such a dear old sentimental baby it is. School girl slush. Pete, don't be silly!"

"Well, that's the way I feel, anyhow," said the big fellow, releasing her with a sigh of content. "You ain't cross with me, eh, Jeannie?"

She shook her head, the warm blood flushing her cheeks. An almost maternal tenderness shone in her eyes. She patted his arm caressingly.

"Why should I be? I'm glad you feel that way about me. Any girl would. Oh, Pete, do look at Pup. He looks quite sulky."

Pete laughed. "Well, you ain't taken a mite of notice of him. Look at the way his ears curl into the sides of his face. He ain't easy in his mind. He thinks maybe you don't love him any more."

She bent swiftly and, catching the dog's head between her two hands, kissed his smooth forehead repentently. The cattleman looked on enviously.

"Kind of waste, ain't it?" he enquired, grumblingly. "Pup ain't able to value them kisses like he ought. Now if it was me . . ."

"You turn father's horse loose and come into the house," said Jean. "Don't you know that there is some serious business in hand? I'm so excited that I hardly know to tell you about it. How shall I begin?"

"At the beginning. I don't know a thing. And I'm fair bursting with curiosity. You ain't found a gold mine, have you, Jeannie?"

"I hope it will prove almost as good. We—that is, Mr. Heritage, the Adaires, and ourselves are going to take up a timber area as soon as ever we can. Pete, isn't it grand? We're going to fight Frame and Garraway on something like equal terms. Mr. Heritage says he is certain he can find enough capital to carry on with. Dad didn't quite take to the idea at first, but now he's more enthusiastic than any of us. You know he has always longed for a chance like this. We're going to talk the whole thing over very carefully and seriously. That's why I sent for you."

Pete received this piece of news with a grave face.

"Going to buck the big fellers, are we? That'll take some doing I'm thinking." He shook his head dubiously. "I don't want to discourage anybody, but don't it seem like stirring up Providence with a three-pronged fork to get butting in among the talent like that. Why, Garraway 'll go stone crazy."

"Faint heart," taunted the girl. "Is this Pete Diamond or Little Susie Chanter, from over the river, that is talking?"

"I'm thinking of Tas Perkins, Jeannie."

"Tas Perkins! Yes, I know he failed. Frame was far too clever for him. Our case is different. Fore-warned is fore-armed, you know, Pete. We can start where Tas and the others left off. Besides, it's purely a matter of capital. Mr. Heritage and father both say so. Now then, Giant Faint-heart?"

But the cattleman still refused to smile.

"Jeannie, I heard yesterday that Tas Perkins was dead. He . . . they say he killed himself."

"You don't mean that," she said, in a shocked voice "Oh, Pete, surely not. His poor mother. Why did he do it? Was . . . was it anything to do with what we have been talking of?"

Pete's growing anger at recollection of the bitter injustice responsible for the tragedy brought the blood to his face in a dull flush. Something of the old reckless spirit, now so carefully suppressed in the presence of this girl, showed itself in his smouldering eyes.

"It had everything to do with it. Maybe Tas Perkins was no near friend of mine, but they was worse than him on the coast. Them timber folk never let up on him once. They hounded him wherever he went. He tried a dozen times to start up in his business, but they broke his credit every time. The end was like I told you. Tas took his gun and shot himself."

"Oh, poor fellow! How dreadful Frame and the rest will feel when they know. Pete, it's wicked."

Pete raised both arms over his head in a sudden fierce gesture. "Them feel? They're glad, I tell you . . . glad. It was Garraway told me about it in the first place. He was down at the river early yesterday morning. I ast him why they set on Perkins like they did, and how d'you suppose he answered me? 'Shot himself, has he,' says Slum. 'Then, by God, he done the right thing for once. It'll teach

others to mind their own business. They'll be no more butting in after this.' Will there not, I wonder ! "

He paused a moment, then resumed more quietly. " Jeannie, if it is only because of what Garraway said, I'm with your father and Heritage in this. But I go into it with my eyes open. I know the sort of men we're getting up against. They'll be no half measures in this fight. Now, jess what part did you reckon I was going to play ? What can I do to help us win ? "

" That's for you men to determine," said Jean. " The others are inside now, waiting for us. We're to hold a kind of meeting. If we fight hard and fight fair, we're bound to win in spite of them all."

The cattleman smiled grimly.

" Oh, I reckon we'll fight hard enough. As to fighting fair, that mostly depends on how the other side shape. Remember, we ain't tackling no Christian Brotherhood. They can set the rules to suit themselves. But you can bet we'll follow their lead every time."

" Now you're trying to make me cross," said the girl. " Boy, that won't do. We can win without descending to the methods of Frame and Garraway. No matter what they do, we must play the game ; then we shall have no need to reproach ourselves after. Clean hands, Pete ; always clean hands. Promise ! "

He began to protest weakly, but she would not listen.

" Clean hands, Boy ! Promise me ! " she cried insistently.

" Well, then I promise," the big fellow grumbled. " So far as I can I'll side-step them. Only you want to remember I'm only human. They's some things no man can stand for." He began to smile in spite of himself. " Jeannie, I b'lieve you could make me promise pretty near anything you wanted. You're in all wrong over this thing though. If we don't watch out they'll get us for sure."

" Not they. Now come along, or they'll be wondering what is keeping us. Think you can leave your old cows for a while ? "

" Any time the postman calls, I can get away," said Pete, promptly. " You can send a letter every day, if you want to."

Peggy Adaire was waiting for them on the verandah. She called out laughingly as they approached, " for conspirators you are abominably lackadaisical. Jean, your father is wriggling like bait on a fish-hook. He's getting

quite irritable. He wants to be at Garraway's throat right away."

"He'll soon ease up when he gets something to do," remarked Pete, as Peggy led the way inside. "Well, Jack, how are we? You look sort of different. Maybe it's the clothes you're wearing. Where did you raise them?"

Heritage smiled.

"Mrs. Salter scared them up from somewhere. I can grub around now all I want, without having to worry about my tailor's bill. I feel heaps more comfortable in dungarees, anyhow. Besides, we think of taking a trip through the bush, and it's as well for me to be dressed for the part."

"Is that so?" The cattleman dropped into a chair and looked soberly at Charley Salter. "Well, I got your note. They's something doing, it seems. Pull the trigger and shoot. I'm here to listen."

The stout man pointed to Heritage.

"It's his idea. I'll let him talk first. Go on, Jack."

In response, Heritage outlined the broad facts of his proposition. He dwelt particularly upon his relations with Frame, recounting the conversation he had had with the timber man prior to leaving the mainland and his recent meeting with Garraway.

"Of course, you will understand that the practical part of the affair is beyond my handling. When I have raised what capital we need, I hope to return here and place myself under orders. I have no doubt I shall manage to be of some use once I get into the way of things," he finished. "As regards Frame, I have written declining to proceed with his affair. In order to make the matter perfectly plain I told him further that it was my intention to disregard any appeal he might make for the future. I'm sorry to remember that I wrote rather more forcibly perhaps than was necessary. Still, it's too late now. I should not be surprised to find that Garraway has already written to tell him about my visit."

Phil Adaire, resting in Salter's easy chair, looked up with a little nod of concurrence.

"That is exactly what Garraway would do. He is a man who never allows the grass to grow under his feet. In that we will do well to imitate him. You may be quite sure that we shall not be permitted to put our hands into Frame's pockets without protest. Mr. Heritage, what plans have you for the future?"

Heritage looked at the old man rather uncertainly. Adaire puzzled him not a little at times. There was about him something almost furtive, a kind of timorous reticence which became more and more accentuated as time went on. Never communicative at any time, towards Heritage the old man maintained a reserve excusably hard to account for, considering the evident friendliness of the others. This was, for instance, almost the first occasion on which Adaire had directly addressed him. His avoidance of Heritage was, indeed, so marked as to suggest to the young man that it was deliberate. He was certain that even Peggy had noticed this peculiarity of her father, and wondered at it.

" None as yet, Mr. Adaire. In a general way, of course, we know what we intend to do, but the details are hazy. You have a suggestion to make, perhaps ? "

" Only that it would be wise to select one of us as leader," returned the old man, quietly. " Too many cooks, you know, spoil the broth. Let us choose the most capable among us and defer to him loyally in all things. Only by so doing can we hope for intelligent co-operation. I would like to suggest Charley Salter. Indeed, giving due respect to the rest of us, he is the only one possible. His experience is greater than ours, and he knows exactly the requirements of the trade. Am I right, Charley ? "

" Well, I know a little bit," confessed the stout man, obviously pleased. " I doubt you need a younger man though. I ain't so spry as I'd like to be. Jack here, or Pete . . ."

" Ain't candidates," finished the last named, quickly. " How about it, Jack ? "

" Agreed," said Heritage, with a smile. " Mr. Salter was in my mind from the start. I assumed, of course, that Mr. Adaire would not wish to take too active a part in affairs owing to his ill-health. Do the ladies have a vote, by the way ? "

" There is no opposition," affirmed Peggy. " Now, Mr. Salter, you are duly elected. Jean, we must help all we can."

The stout man looked from face to face soberly. Pete Diamond was eyeing the ceiling, as if in search of inspiration. Adaire seemed to be wrapt in his own thoughts. He sat huddled in his chair, his chin in his hand, his eyes looking vacantly before him.

" Friends, before we come down to how and why, they's jess three things I'd like to say. So far we've been more or

less joking over what we mean to do. That's right enough in its way, but the sooner we wake up to the fact that we're entering on no picnic, the better for us. First, no matter what happens, keep your own counsel. The man that don't know when to hold his tongue is more dangerous to his friends than to his enemies. Second, trust no one unless you have to. Beyond ourselves here in the room, I know to no one on The Bend with ginger enough to fight Frame of a finish, unless it's George Judney and Sollum. Last of all, get it out of your heads that we can try, fail, and still carry on as we are now. We can't. It's either win out or get out."

He turned sharply to Heritage, his usually smiling face tense and set. His little eyes had suddenly become hard and calculating.

"Let's have that Guv'ment tracing that Frame gave you, Jack." He spread it on the table in front of him. "Get your heads over this. I'm going to try to show you jess where I think we can come in behind Frame and crowd him out."

CHAPTER IX

"THEM shaded parts on the map represent the timber areas," continued Salter. It don't necessarily mean marketable timber; jess growing forest, with good and bad alike. According to this they's nigh five thousand acres marked around Timber Bend. Now here's a thing I don't understand. Frame told Jack that he and the others owned pretty well the whole of the timber ground here. If that's so, then why ain't they but only these two holdings of five and three hundred acres got Frame's name printed across them? Why ain't he entered up on the others? I don't know. That's one of the things we got to find out."

"On the other map Frame showed Jack they was only two names beside his own and Slum Garraway's. One of those two was Stewart. On this map, as you can see, they's about fifteen names showing, each covering anything from one to three hundred acres. Maybe these ain't timber holdings of any value. They may represent Crown Purchase. That don't alter the fact that they don't appear on Frame's other and private map of the locality. Another thing. These names here ain't familiar. Who are Strut, Adamson, and McIntyre? Ever hear of them before, Pete?"

The cattleman shook his head.

"They's no men with names like that living hereabouts, that I know of. Of course, I don't know everybody though."

Salter pursed his lips. "Well, let it go for the minute. Now, things seem to narrow themselves down to this. If we take Jack's map here as correct, out of a total of five thousand acres Frame and Slum between them hold 1,200 acres, Stewart 500, and McIntyre and the rest of them about 2,000, which makes a total of 3,700 acres. They's a balance over of 1,300 acres. Now leave out my little pocket of three hundred acres, say, and they's around thousand to account for. Where is it? And is they timber on it that's worth touching? Until we can answer those two questions we

can't say what we want to do. We've got to find land and register it. That's the first step. Now they's another thing I want to show you.

"This here round dub stands for Gray Lagoon, I take it. Well, now, if you follow the line from east to west, it looks like Frame and those others hold all the frontage to the plains. It looks mighty like they fixed things that way on purpose, so as to block any outlet from the back country. Cunning, eh? On top of that they hold both banks of the Bat River for a quarter of a mile east of Gray Lagoon. So far as I can see now they's no outlet we can take. Yet we got to find one somewhere."

"In the meantime we can't do better than slip off quietly and hunt out more timber. Then we lodge our application, and Jack here goes back home to raise what money we need to start. That's his job. Without capital we can't last a month. And now we got to find jobs for the rest of you."

The stout man settled himself more firmly in his chair and looked round meditatively. His eye fell on Adaire and he smiled suddenly.

"Phil, I was wondering jess what you could do to help, but now I know. We're going to look to you to keep our books and accounts. I ain't no lover of figgers and such like, but they's times when you got to have them. Peggy, you can help your dad. That leaves Jean, Pete, and me. If I'm to act boss of this job I got to have my hands free to tackle things as they come. Jean 'll stay with me and kind of help on the odd jobs. Pete, we'll need men later on. You know the folks up and down the coast as well as any of us. If they's good staunch men out of work, you ought to be able to bring some of them into camp. Think you can do it?"

"Gimme a fortnight and I'll lend you some of the best bushwhackers that ever lifted an axe," said the big fellow, promptly. "I can get the two Samson boys any time I want them, and Ben Sharp would come too, I think. Them three ain't only good workers, they're good fighters. *And* they hate Garraway's worse'n poison."

"Good enough," said Salter. "I know the breed. I've worked alongside Ben Sharp more than once. Well, we're leaving that matter to you. Hunt up a half-dozen good men and have them ready to come up as soon as you pass the word."

" Don't worry," said Pete.

He looked across at Heritage. The tones of his voice became suddenly alert.

" Jack, they's this I'd like to say, before it's too late, maybe. I take it they's no reasonable doubt of your pulling off your part of the affair ? They's a saying that a chain is as strong as its weakest link. Our chain is going to be made up of capital, hard work, and good management. If one of them three fail us we're gone to the pack. If we don't beat Frame, he beats us. It ain't yourself nor me only, that you've to consider. We're young ; we can make a fresh start. But with the others it's different. A smash for them means a smash past any mending. They got their homes and interests here. Me ! I can hop out anywhere. What I ain't got I can't lose. And you got your other business across the water. I ain't saying this jess to rile you. I want us all to be dead sure what we're doing before we take the jump off."

" Heritage felt the cattleman's black eyes searching his face with a keenness that seemed to penetrate to the very core of his mind. The strange, magnetic personality of this man, unconscious though it was, held his wits as in a vice. As before, he could only return the gaze helplessly. At that moment he could no more have counterfeited an assurance he did not feel than he could have flown in the air.

" Indeed, and I've thought of all you say," he returned, earnestly. " I can only ask you all to believe that I will do my best. No man can do more than that. I can and will raise the money we need. Even supposing all other means to fail I can still realise on my own private income. That is not much, to be sure, but the fact of my offering to pledge it to the interest of us all should help to prove my sincerity. I am heart and soul in this thing. You believe that ? "

Pete's eyes softened.

" I never doubted otherwise. It was only that I wanted you to know how Jean and Peggy stand in the matter. You ain't mad with me, eh ? "

" Considering you know as little about me, I can only feel amazed that you trust me to the extent you do," said Heritage. " I seem quite miraculously to have fallen among friends. Be sure that I shall never give you cause to regret my acquaintance."

Quite naturally, it seemed, his eyes sought those of Peggy Adaire. The girl was smiling at him encouragingly. He

told himself for the hundredth time that he would do a great deal to retain her confidence.

Jean Salter broke into her jolly laugh.

"Mr. Heritage, I can see your hands will be full for the next few months. With the busy times coming, how on earth will you manage to continue your search for the man you want? Upon my word, I do believe you have forgotten all about him. Confess now!"

Heritage coloured guiltily.

"You're perfectly right, Miss Jean. As a matter of fact, I had forgotten Barkley, for the moment. Confound the man . . . and yet no, I shouldn't say that. But for him I should never have come to know you all. Well, after all I suppose I can keep on asking for news of him, can't I? Indeed, this affair of ours will probably help me there. I am bound to come into touch with people more often. It will be strange if some one or other cannot remember the man. In the meantime I shall have to explain my non-success to my partner as best I can. I can see myself getting a good wigging."

For all the joking air with which Heritage spoke the last words, he felt far from satisfied with himself. Three weeks of continual effort to discover the whereabouts of Barkley or his friends had brought no result whatever. So far as Timber Bend was concerned the man appeared simply not to exist. Either Colvin's information was hopelessly at fault, or else the luck had been very much against them. For no visible reason whatever Heritage remained obstinately convinced of the latter. More than once he had been tempted to widen the scope of his activities by making a journey up or down the coast. Yet always some strange reluctancy held him where he was.

"Well, we got some idea now of what's wanted of each of us," announced Salter comfortably, after some little further discussion of their plans for the immediate future. "We'll jess let Pete go round his stock and fix his belongings the way he wants them, and then you and him and me will go land hunting. When you come back from the mainland, Jack, they'll have to be a little re-arrangement of quarters. If you don't exactly object we'll give your room to Pete and send you along to Phil Adaire and Peggy to be took care of. Eh, now how'll that suit everybody?"

Receiving a general assurance that it would, the stout man rose chuckling from his seat and stumped out of the room.

When Heritage returned to the house after having seen the Adaires part of their way home, Jean Salter and Pete were still talking earnestly together in the little sitting room. Of Salter himself there was no sign until tea was ready, when he appeared at table in more than usually garrulous mood.

In the couple of days during which they waited Pete Diamond's disposal of his affairs, Heritage seized the opportunity to make himself familiar with some of the country about The Bend. He paid a second visit to Garraway's camp ; refraining, however, from seeking a further acquaintance with the big manager. Accompanied by Charley Salter he visited Gray Lagoon. Together they made the trip along part of its flat, mud-covered shore, here and there testing the depth of the water, and scanning carefully the couple of small creeks that fed it from the swiftly flowing Bat River to northwards. On the third morning Pete returned from the coast, and the stout man declared himself ready to lead them on a still hunt through the bush.

" So's not to advertise ourselves we'll get away at night," he said. " I've told the girls to give out that we've gone fishing, if any sticky-beaks get to asking why we ain't visible no more. You can bet them gooseberry eyes of Garraway's ain't missing too much."

Crossing the plains in the faint light of the stars was no great hardship, but once within the shadow of the big timber the travelling became much more difficult. The stout man lumbered cheerfully in the lead, whistling softly and not very tunefully as he went. Pete went next in turn, his kangaroo dog treading softly at his heels. Heritage, as became his inexperience, brought up the rear. For him, at any rate, the journey soon began to lose its attractions. In spite of the utmost caution he found it almost impossible to avoid petty disaster. Jagged limbs stabbed at him from the blackness as he passed ; obstacles met his feet at every step. The twisted undergrowth swept down upon him from all sides, catching in the fastenings of his leather leggings, tearing the hat from his head, rasping his bare skin unmercifully. Once he missed his footing and tumbled headlong into a bed of nettles. Pete hauled him out by the legs and set him upright with an admonishing chuckle.

" You want to chuck up your feet a little higher. This ain't any pavement to slide along on like you do in the cities. Your legs tired ? "

"They're falling off," said Heritage, ruefully.

Pete laughed unsympathetically.

"That's how it would feel. Bush walking, especially at night, takes getting used to. You'll get into the way of things after a time. Lord save us, don't shoulder your axe like that. Was you toting it that way when you done your high dive into the nettles?"

"Well, why not?" asked Heritage, feeling tenderly of his bruises. "Certainly I carried the axe on my shoulder. It's the easiest way, isn't it?"

"But not the safest," the cattleman assured him, solemnly. "It's a merciful thing you ain't carved yourself into little pieces. With your axe like that it's a hundred to one you catch the blade as you come down. Hold it close up to the head, your arm hanging and the blade laying flat. Then if you fall the edge is away from you."

The stout man was calling impatiently from the gloom ahead, and Pete walked on. More cautiously now than ever Heritage followed the smudge of denser shadow which he knew to be the cattleman's broad back. Presently, as time passed, a pale effulgence began to penetrate the bush, broadening to a silver radiance as the moon climbed up behind the trembling fretwork of limbs outlined against the clear sky. With the coming of the light the vast forest seemed to waken all at once. Strange rustlings sounded around and beyond, there came the echo of stealthy feet, the crackle and snap of breaking twigs under the passage of some four-footed denizen of the undergrowth. A possum screamed suddenly in the distance. Hardly had the sound died away than something sprung from the ground almost beneath Heritage's feet. For a second he was startled. Then he recognised Pete's dog, and gave a sigh of relief. A little later Salter called a halt.

When Heritage came up with the others he found himself in the centre of a tiny natural clearing. On the far side was a narrow gutter of trickling water. The ground was criss-crossed with fallen spars and carpeted thickly with ferns and mosses.

The stout man lowered his pack to earth with a tired grunt.

"I ain't as young as I was, seemingly. I'm old and fat. Either of them things is fatal, and I got them both. Jack, never get old or fat. It don't pay."

Pete was already clearing away the rubbish around them,

throwing it back so as to leave a circle of clear ground on which to make camp. Salter picked up a slash-hook and beckoned to Heritage.

"I can guess you're feeling sore, but we got to fix ourselves as comfortable as we can," he observed. "If you gather the fern as I cut it, we'll rig our beds in a jiffy. Pete'll light a fire and set the billy. We'll all rest better after a bit of a snack."

Afterwards, as he lay on his improvised mattress, his head resting on a rolled-up bluey and his feet outstretched to the fire, Heritage began to wonder if his agreement with the stout man's affirmation had not been too precipitate. In spite of his aching limbs sleep was never farther from him. The novelty of his situation took hold of him and for a while he let his thoughts run riot. Gradually the fire burnt down, leaving only a pile of glowing cinders. The sounds from the bush became less frequent. A touch of frost crept into the air. Heritage pulled the blanket closer about him and shut his eyes resolutely. When next he opened them he was surprised to find it was broad daylight.

Pete Diamond, bending over the fire, looked over at him with a grin. "I thought you was never going to rouse. Ready for your breakfast? Charley's gone prospecting for Frame's south-west corner. We start in from there. Can you eat cold boiled bacon?"

Heritage rose stiffly to his feet. He sniffed the air hungrily. "I could eat a horse. Here's Mr. Salter now."

The stout man was beaming with satisfaction.

"Well, I found it all right," he declared. "Considering the dark we made out fairly well. What's that?"

Hitherto the going had been fairly mixed, patches of scrub-land alternating with strips of plain and little open glades similar to that where they were camped. Within half an hour of starting afresh, however, Heritage was in the very heart of the forest proper. Everywhere about them was a riot of vegetation which flowed onwards in a tide of gleaming green. The air was full of a sharp penetrating odour; the not unpleasant scent of the gums mingled with the dank vegetable smell of decaying mould. High overhead the great spreading tops of the gums reached one towards another, in places their huge limbs interlocking as if in deadly strife. Here and there the smooth or calloused trunks were hung with festoons of matted creeper, or draped with swaying tentacles of bark that vibrated harshly when

the wind was high. Through all filtered the rich sunlight, filling the depths of the bush with soft pulsing radiance.

At mid-day they halted for lunch on the crest of a rise. Noting the cool prospect presented by the ferns in the gully below, Heritage could not forbear commenting on the stout man's choice of a camp.

" Wouldn't it be much cooler down there ? " he ventured, wiping away the perspiration which trickled down his face.

" Merskiters," said Salter, laconically.

" Besides which," supplemented Pete, glancing sympathetically at Heritage's crimson face, " you'd find it a good deal more trying than it is here. They ain't a breath of air in the gullies. It 'ud be like an oven. And another thing is that we keep our bearings better by sticking to high ground."

Salter was referring to his map.

" I'm leading well clear of the patch of land I found before," he explained. " I know the bearings of that quite well enough to describe on the application. It's new country that we want."

He sent his eyes over the prospect before them and grunted sourly. " Ain't anything here worth noticing, eh, Pete ? I'll bet Garraway's been along this way some time or other. Someone's tried a chip in that big stringy over yonder. I don't wonder at him taking it for a paling tree. Most always that red streak in the bark shows a splitter. You see the tree I mean, Jack ? "

Heritage nodded.

" That other tree close to it—the small one with dark green leaves, isn't that a beech. I've seen the kind before ; in Gippsland, I think it was."

" It is and it ain't," said Salter, with a swift appraising look in the direction indicated. " Here in Tassie we call them myrtles, though they're beech right enough on the mainland. We got names of our own for things this side the straits. If you don't want to get tangled up you'll have to learn some of them."

" For instance ? " suggested the young man.

" Well, I've jess told you that we call your beech, myrtle. Hazel we call dog-wood ; your dog-wood we call merry weed. Why merry, the good Lord only knows. The man that finds that stuff growing on his bit of a farm don't feel particular merry, I can tell you. It's worse to get rid of than original sin. We got names of our own even for some of

the animals. For instance they ain't no wombats here; we call them badgers. And so on. You'll get to know them in time."

"I suppose so," said Heritage, doubtfully.

Salter looked about him again with a return to his former discontent.

"This country would break the heart of an ox. I doubt we're going in the wrong direction after all. Not a sign of what we want."

His ill-humour caused Heritage to eye him in astonishment. He caught the look and smiled slowly.

"You're judging the timber by the size of it, ain't you, Jack? Well, you can no more do that than you can judge the quality of land by the class of scrub it grows. Sometimes you hit it and sometimes you don't. Nature's about the most inconsistent cuss that ever was. She'll grow a first-class scrub on country that ain't worth a last season's wood bug; and she'll cover potato land with a mess of sag, sword-grass and gum sticks that you'd swear wouldn't grow nowhere but on the edge of the plains. That timber in front of us, for instance, would be all right if it wasn't for half a hundred objections. It's flukey to start with. Then, nine out of ten of the stringys are hollow (tap some of them with the axe and listen to the sound). And, to cap the lot, what you're taking to be blackwood ain't blackwood at all. No, sir it's pencil-wood. If you still ain't satisfied, look at the level we're on, in spite of being higher than the gullies. Valley timber ain't any good; it's too warpy. We've to find a good high bank of country if we're going to do any good."

"The ground rises steadily all the way between here and Simmins' Track," said Pete, thoughtfully. "Anyone ever try the far side?"

Salter regarded him with an expression of benevolent amusement. "Been there yourself?" he inquired.

Pete shook his head.

"Neither have I," said the stout man. "I know plenty that have, though. They say so, anyway. D'you know what that country is? All iron-stone and shale, with about one tree to the acre. Good mineral country maybe, but as much use to a saw-miller as a phonograph to a deaf mute.

The cattleman, however, was not so easily disposed of. He continued to regard Salter earnestly.

"That's what they all *think*, Charley; but do they *know*?

I doubt it. In spite of what some of 'em say, I don't believe a soul of them has been past Simmins' Track. The country up to there ain't promising, I grant you. But what's on the other side? The only way to answer that is to go through and find out. I don't know where else to look, anyhow."

"And that's a fact," agreed Salter, gloomily. "Well, if you want to go north, we'll go north. Only don't say I didn't warn you? if you find things ain't what you want. If we push ahead we ought to hit the track about nightfall. We'll keep going till we do."

Later, when the stout man flung down his traps with a sigh of thankfulness and called to Pete to gather a few kindlings before it became too dark, Heritage reminded him of the assertion.

"I thought we were to camp on Simmins' Track, Mr. Salter? Is it so very much ahead of us then?"

"Why, this is Simmins', ain't it?"

"But I don't see any sign of a track," protested the young man, gazing round, into the gathering dusk.

"That's because they ain't any to see," said the stout man, easily. "The place ain't anything more than jess a name. They was a man named Simmins come through across country from Zechan, one time in the old days. The thing that saved him from getting bushed for good and all was him keeping to this ridge all the way. Even as it was he was weeks getting through, and would have starved only he managed by a stroke of luck to knock a badger on the head. Pretty tough meat, I reckon; but it kept him alive. That's why badgers is protected by the Guv'ment."

After they had eaten, and the three of them were disposed comfortably around the fire, Heritage asked a question which had puzzled him for some time.

"Why is it that men like Frame are permitted to hold so much idle country? Idle, and therefore unproductive. It seems to me that our legislation is sadly in need of revision. With proper supervision the supply of timber should be sufficient to meet our requirements for years to come. As things are going now, our forests are in danger of being denuded within a decade."

"Of course," said Salter, puffing angrily at his pipe "But what are you to do. The Guv'ment don't take any interest in the matter, beyond drawing salaries regular. I been years on the coast here and never remember seeing an inspector from the Forestry Department. No, nor ever

heard of one being about. Down south of the island you may find one, but not here. And the timber wolves don't care a brass button so long as the bush lasts their time, and the dividends come rolling in regular. Pete here is a cattleman, not a bush-whacker; yet even he knows where the shoe pinches."

"Why, if you ast me, it certainly is the fault of the Guv'ment" agreed the big fellow. "A lot of the wastage would be prevented if they called for a straight-cut area tax, instead of fiddling about with royalties. Take Frame, for instance. Watch the way he works. He gets into a bed of timber and picks the eye out of it. He don't touch nothing but the best; and he hauls it out to his mills and leaves the slash and rubbish lying on the ground jess as his men fell it. In a year or so they comes a fire, and up comes a forest of saplings that grow so close together that they never reach a marketable size, even though they was untouched for a millenium of years. What good is that country after Frame's done with it? They's tons of good timber left behind to burn or rot away. For years the land ain't fit for cultivation, or even grass, because of the rubbish left on it. All it serves is to harbour the breeding of weeds and vermin. But Frame don't care. He's away on ahead in his next holding, doing the same there. Ain't that so, Charley?"

"Dead right," said Salter. "The way I see it, they shouldn't be a stick of decent timber left behind. All the grist should go to the mill. Talking about mills, I hope one day we will be able to put in a saw-mill of our own. If ever we get as far as floating a real on-the-market company, you can bet that'll be one of the first things to do. As things are at present we can't do better than jess keep to staves and palings, and maybe a bit of figured wood in the log. What's worrying me now is to know how to get our stuff to the line. As far as I can see we *got* to cross Frame's land. Yet you know that ain't possible."

Evidently the problem was one that exercised the mind of the stout man considerably, for Heritage heard him tossing and grunting far into the night. In spite of his restless night, however, Salter was first out next morning. He seemed in a fever to begin the day's work.

It was early in the forenoon that they made their discovery. Pete Diamond was some distance in the lead, climbing the last few yards of a sharp ascent. Presently he

found the way barred by a huge jumble of rocks strewn along the crest of the ridge. Scrambling to the top of one of these, the better to view the country ahead, he began waving excitedly.

"By gum, if he ain't struck it," exclaimed Salter. He dropped what he was carrying and began to claw his way upwards in panting triumph. The cattleman pointed to the prospect beneath them with a hand that shook slightly.

"Charley, if they's one acre they's a thousand. Look at it. In the name of Mike, who'd have guessed to find anything like this."

Salter answered nothing for the moment. He was staring in a kind of wonder at what he saw. Heritage, scarcely less excited, was trying vainly to estimate the acreage of the find. He ended by shaking his head in comical bewilderment. There seemed no limit to the rolling blackwood forest before them. It stretched away on all sides in a sea of green shadow streaked with golden threads of sunlight where the gently swaying branches moved about the lesser undergrowth.

"We'll jess go down there and sample a tree or two," said Salter a little hoarsely. "If she's sound on the edge, she'll be sounder as you go in. When I turn over I suppose I'll wake up."

"I'll wait here for you," said Heritage. "This is the hour of the expert. I'd only be in the way."

He might have saved himself the trouble of speaking. The others had left with such precipitance that it was doubtful if they had heard him at all. Heritage saw them scrambling down the side of the ridge and on into the scrub, where they were quickly lost to sight. A little later came the faint echo of an axe.

Heritage found a shady corner among the rocks and settled down to enjoy a smoke. It seemed hours before the sight of Pup bounding up the bank towards him notified him that his friends were returning. In a little while they came into view, walking soberly enough and conversing not at all. An absurd misgiving seized him that their rejoicing had been premature. Salter's first words, however, reassured him.

"Well, she's there all right. You could blow me down with a pair of bellows. I never thought to see anything like it this side of Simmins' Track. Why, it's always been a kind of tradition with us folks on The Bend that they was nothing here but rocks, ridges, and rattle-grass, as the

saying is. When Garraway hears what we've found he'll be as mad as a New Norfolk snake. I take off my hat to Pete Diamond."

"Meaning me," grinned the cattleman happily. "Keep your lid on, Charley. A man as bald as you didn't ought to be rash. The sun might bite you."

Salter was tugging thoughtfully at his untidy moustache. Already he was immersed in calculation.

"What say, Pete? How'll this do to describe her? Bounded on the south by Simmins' Track, north by the Pin-hole Valley, east by them paper-bark swamps, and west . . . now what in blazes do we have for our west line? She don't seem to have no limit."

"West by the horizon," suggested Heritage.

"Well, you're modest, ain't you," smiled the stout man. "Why don't we ast for a lease of Tassie, and be done with it. Suppose we say west by the Bat River. She curves in there under the hills. We ought to have about five hundred acres of the best then, not counting my little patch back home. It'll do us for quite a while."

"If we can get it out to a market," put in Pete, soberly.

Salter glanced at him quickly. "For Mike's sake, don't grouch now. We'll find a way out all right, all right. Each man to his job, and maybe the brand won't smear too bad after all. Let's make a bee-line for home. We can do it by dark, if we look slick."

It was approaching dusk by the time they tapped Frame's tramline on the return journey. At sight of it winding like a snake through the dimming bush ahead, Salter halted uncertainly.

"If we follow along to Garraway's camp we make it a whole lot easier and shorter walking. On the other hand, do we care if any of that crowd see us. I leave it to you."

Pete glanced at Heritage who was taking advantage of the halt to stretch his fiercely aching body on the none too soft ground by the side of the rails.

"The shortest way's the nearest. Let's start a guessing competition for Slum and the rest of them. I'd like fine to tickle their curiosity."

"The same here," asserted Heritage. "If Garraway means to be nasty, it's as well to know it. Besides which, I want to get to where I can sleep in a real bed."

Salter led off down the line without further comment. Five minutes later, however, he said plaintively, "Well, jess

as you like. If it comes to scrapping though, I'd like you to remember that I'm old and fat. I can't run as fast as I used to. Lord save us, Jack, d'you remember the first time I seen you? The swipe you landed Jerry Summers? Whoof! . . . jess like that. Kind of made me love you right away. Your feet sore?"

"Heels raw," said Heritage, grimacing. "I shall never walk decently any more."

"A bit of mutton fat rubbed on them when you get home, and you won't know yourself by morning," comforted Pete. "Bless me, you might have had to keep walking for a week, if we hadn't struck it when we did."

"I should have done nothing of the kind," retorted the young man. "I should have died. Then you'd have buried me and gone on by yourselves."

Pete grinned and called softly to his dog.

"You come to heel, Pup. I don't want none of Frame's men taking you for a tiger and potting your old carcase. You can see the fires at the camp already. Ain't they someone shouting a lot?"

Almost immediately Salter gave an exclamation of concern.

"They's something up," he declared. "What's all them men doing in front of the big hut? They's Garraway himself. Kind of seems they's a row going on."

"Prayer meeting," suggested Pete. He laughed as he spoke, but Heritage thought he noticed a sudden stiffening of the big fellow's body as if he scented a less respectable solution after all.

They were near enough now to see that the crowd was intent upon some happening within the little circle of open ground between themselves and the door of the mess-house. So engrossed were they indeed, that Pete and the others had pushed themselves almost to the inside edge of the circle before their presence was noticed.

"Good Lord, Sollum's been hurt," grunted Salter, catching a glimpse of a man's figure huddled on the ground beyond.

Pete said nothing, but continued to bore unceremoniously through the muttering crowd, regardless of the black looks turned on him. A big man in moleskins stepped deliberately in Heritage's way as he moved after Salter. Realising that it was no time to argue, Heritage, momentarily forgetful of his sore heels, ducked smartly beneath the huge arm outstretched to bar the path and slipped past with all his old-time footballing celerity. The fellow spun round with an

oath, but the darkness puzzled him and he fell back muttering. The incident passed out of Heritage's mind almost immediately. His whole attention was claimed by the scene before him.

Sollum Joe lay face down on the hard ground. The light coming from the open door of the bunk-house fell directly upon his huddled body. His knees were drawn up to his stomach and one arm was outstretched as if to protect his head. There was in the attitude something at once terrible and pathetic.

But it was not at Sollum that Heritage looked, except for that first swift glance. Two men were snapping words at each other in the crisp, deadly manner that foreshadows almost certain tragedy. One was Garraway, Frame's big manager, who stood on the inside edge of the swaying crowd. Heritage could note the forward thrust of the great bull head and the threatening hunch of the wide shoulders. The other man was George Judney, crouched cat-like across the motionless body of his mate.

"You Judney, get out of the way. Sollum only got the clip that was coming to him. I warned both of you more than once that you couldn't run this place to suit yourselves, in the way you were doing, without falling foul of me sooner or later. I'm going to souse Joe in the creek and soak some of the cussed foolishness out of him."

Judney's reply came swiftly on the heels of the manager's big, booming voice.

"Talk, Slum Garraway—jess talk. I know you—none better, for the dirty bully you are. Maybe I ain't but half your size, but you can't scare me. The first man that puts a finger on Joe gets my knife in his ribs. I mean that. I ain't fighting no pack of wolves with my bare hands. You call yourself a man, do you? And then let Joe get downed jess for doing a mite of kindness to them you've used and thrown out like a dry sponge after you've squeezed the health and strength outen them and rooked them of the wages they'd ought to get."

Someone had put a match to a pile of brushwood close by. As the flames leapt upwards they illumined the scene with a brightness almost equalling the light of day. From the shadow beyond a man's voice called roughly:

"Out him, Boss!"

Garraway took no notice. He was watching Judney intently.

" You're talking plain rot, George. As for using that knife you've got there, I'd remind you that this isn't any American lumber camp. You get to throwing weapons around and see what happens to you. Best get out of my way before it's too late."

" Hold on a minute." The lank hut-keeper threw up his right hand suddenly, the wide blade of his sheath knife cutting a gleaming arc through the firelight. " You keep where you are, Slum. I ain't wishing to kill nobody, but I warn you they's a limit to any man's patience. You ain't going to man-handle Sollum no more. He's my mate. You can get to hell . . . the lot of you."

There was absolute finality in Judney's tones. Not a man there but knew he wasn't bluffing, that he meant what he said. Even Heritage unaccustomed as he was to the primitive in these men dwelling on the outskirts of civilization, sensed the tragedy in the melancholy voice and set his lips nervously. A sudden movement beside him made him look up sharply. Pete Diamond had stepped past him into the circle of firelight. The cattleman's voice sounded clearly and with apparent unconcern.

" You ain't including me in that doxology I hope, George ? I'd feel kind of grateful if you was to omit your friends. You can slide that knife back into your pants pocket. They'll be as no hog killing jess yet awhile. No one's going to touch Sollum."

Pete's sudden appearance was the signal for a little chorus of recognition. Hitherto but a few had been aware of his presence. Slum Garraway, it seemed, had not been one of these. The manager eyed his new opponent uneasily.

" Why, it's you, Pete, is it ? Now will you tell me why you're mixing yourself in this business ? I've got no quarrel with you ! "

" Glad to hear it, Mr. Garraway," said the cattleman evenly. He turned coolly to the man at his side.

" What happened to Sollum ? Is he hurt bad, George ? "

Judney answered without removing his eyes from Garraway's face. " Bad enough, seeing they weren't no call to touch him at all. Joe's jess knocked out, I reckon. I got here a mite too late. The dirty hounds was only starting in on him. And for why, do you think ? "

" Tell us," said Pete, briefly. He added : " That's the idea, Charley. Get him into the hut."

The stout man had slipped his arms under Sollum's spare

frame and was quietly making for the hut. Garraway laughed unpleasantly.

"It don't matter. We can get him when we want him. You finished giving orders on my ground, Pete? Why look for trouble!"

Pete smiled. "I never look for trouble, Mr. Garraway. I don't dodge it either. You ain't surely expecting me to stand aside while you knock Sollum about, are you? I'm waiting to hear what started the row. Go on, George!"

Judney pointed a boney finger into the crowd. "Archie Gatten done it. It was Slum, though, that set him on. And for why? I'm telling you now. You know what happens to one of Frame's men when they've no more use for him. He's told to get out, ain't he? All right. Maybe that's all you can expect. When a man's job is through he can't growl if he's put off. But he's got a right to draw the pay coming to him. Now when Slum here fires a man, it's a wonderful thing how they's lost time and lost tools, and Gawd knows what other rigged up charge against the little bit of money he's been counting on to tide him along till he gets a new job. When he goes out he's no money and no credit. I've seen it happen a score of times. You've all seen it."

Judney paused for breath. The sound of his heavy breathing was intensified by the absolute stillness of his audience. Not a man stirred. It was as though some quality in the lank hut-keeper's accusing voice held them unwillingly at attention while he was speaking.

"It ain't in Joe's nature to see a man go hungry. If he ain't got food of his own to give, he'll sure root around till he gets hold of someone that has. And if that don't answer he takes what comes to hand and passes it along to the man that needs it most. That's Joe's way. I ain't saying whether it's right or wrong. But I do know that Frame's chuck-outs don't owe him anything for the food Sollum gives them to help them along the track. Frame's paid himself in advance."

He paused a second time. Garraway interjected immediately.

"How much more of this rot are we to listen to? You're only trying to bluff your way out of a hole. It's not the first time by a long way that I've caught you two men giving away the company's tucker. I've warned you till

I'm sick of it. If there were any police handy I'd give Sollum in charge. He's no better than a common thief."

"You're a liar," said Judney, swiftly.

A little tremor shook Garraway's big body. His arms dropped to his sides and he took a step forward. Like a flash Pete Diamond stepped in front of the crouching hut-keeper. The cattleman's voice came sharp and incisive.

"No rough-house, Slum. I won't stand for it, I tell you. It's your own fault. Let the men be, and things 'll maybe right themselves. I don't want to mix it with you or anyone, but I've said my say. Take it or leave it."

Imperceptibly the men around Garraway had drawn back into the crowd, so that he was left standing alone in the centre of the little circle. With the swift intrusion of Pete Diamond the original cause of dispute seemed momentarily forgotten. With startling suddenness the affair had resolved itself into a direct issue between Frame's manager and the big cattleman. Yet for some reason best known to himself Garraway hesitated to take up the challenge. Instead, he was moved to bluster furiously.

"I'll take it when I'm ready. When I do, maybe you'll feel it would have paid you better to keep your nose out of other folks' concerns. Now you get off my land, and keep off. You and Salter and . . ." for the first time he looked directly at Heritage, seeming to peer at him now through the dusk. "Why, there's Mr. Heritage. I'm sorry to see you mixing yourself with the company you are. Well, you're of an age to know your own mind. If you'll take my advice though, you'll clear out and take your friends with you. You're a lawyer, you say. Well, tell this man what you know of the laws against trespass. By God, I'll serve an injunction on the three of you."

Heritage had been eyeing the scene fascinatedly. Unnoticed he had slipped his heavy bluey coat to the ground, thus freeing his arms for the fracas he felt certain must ensue. Close behind him stood Charley Salter, his fat cheeks distended ridiculously, the flaring light from the burning bushes playing on his round, glistening skull, from which the hat had fallen in his passage through the crowd.

Heritage opened his mouth to answer, but felt his arm gripped warningly.

"Keep your mouth shut," advised the stout man, in a whisper. "Slum's only wanting to talk dirt to you. You notice he sent Archie Gatton off somewhere a while ago!

Now what did he do that for? I'll bet it was to find Login and Rebner. They ain't either of them been here since we come."

At Garraway's words the figure of the cattleman seemed to stiffen. He thrust his face forward belligerently.

"You're acting foolish, Slum. Be satisfied with what's happened, and let it go at that. We're going right away, if you ain't holding anything over George and Sollum. You was only funning, eh? You're going to let up right now. That's so, ain't it?"

Garraway was peering eagerly about him as if in search of someone. While he stood thus, a man worked himself out of the shadows and began to whisper rapidly in his ear. Charley Salter, whose little twinkling eyes had never left the manager's face, called softly to Pete:

"Login and Rebner can't be found. I'll bet you now that they's nothing doing. Slum ain't over-sure of his men, but only them two."

Garraway straightened himself with a shrug of his big shoulders. He looked directly at Pete.

"I heard what you said. It don't alter the facts. You get right off my land. I make no promise to you or anyone else."

Before the cattleman had time to answer, Judney's rumbling, melancholy voice interjected:

"Tell him we'll be getting offen his land, Pete, when we know jess where his land is."

"What's that you say?" A change, subtle but unmistakable, came on Garraway's face. He peered at Judney intently. "Who said that?"

"I did!" The lank hut-keeper slapped himself on the chest. "Want me to say it again? I says to Pete to tell you we'll get offen your ground if you'll show us jess whereabouts we're treading on it. What about it?"

"You . . . you . . ." The manager appeared to choke. Pete was looking at Judney in amazement.

"In Mike's name, what are you driving at, George?" he said sharply. "You can't bluff out that way."

Judney was looking steadily at Garraway. His voice sounded suddenly confident.

"I'm jess advising you, Slum. This ain't your land no more than it's mine." He waited a second; then added, with a curious inflexion: "Of course I ain't saying it mightn't be the Company's. I reckon it depends on you."

For almost a minute Garraway hesitated in silence. When finally he spoke the furious anger of a moment ago seemed suddenly to have left him. He appeared to choose his words deliberately. His voice boomed coldly menacing.

"As you say, it depends on me. Well, here's my last word. You and Sollum can pack your traps and get out of here first thing to-morrow morning. You're sacked."

"We ain't," denied the hut-keeper.

Garraway's face twisted in a wicked grin.

"Stay on and see then. If you ain't gone by mid-day, I'll have the two of you thrown out by the ears. You're sacked."

"Lying again, as usual," said Judney, unemotionally. "We ain't sacked. We quit your job cold, half an hour ago, when you started to beat Joe up. Think him and me 'ud stay on working for a pack of rooks like you and Frame and the rest of them? You're sacked yourself."

With not even a glance at the manager, Judney turned his back deliberately and entered the hut. After a moment or two of bewildered silence Pete and the others followed him in. As Heritage went through the door he heard Garraway roughly calling to his men to scatter.

"In the name of Mike, what did you do to Slum to make him twist from under like he done?" demanded Pete, as soon as they got inside. "What's all this bluff about the Company's land, George?"

"Jess what you say . . . bluff," said Judney, mournfully. "Don't let it worry you, Pete!"

Crossing quickly to Sollum's bunk he halted with a little grunt of pleased admiration.

"Will you look at this now? Ain't he a oner. So that's why you wasn't out with us again, Joe, after Charley brought you round? You was playing possum, eh!"

Sollum was lying face down across his bunk. The little man's wizzened face was wreathed in smiles, his fingers twined lovingly about the ragged stock of an old shot-gun whose muzzle poked itself unobtrusively through a knot-hole in the slab wall facing the scene of a few minutes back. At Judney's words he withdrew his gun and sat up on the edge of the bunk.

"I sort of thought I might hand that big blob the joker, if you wasn't holding high enough yourself to cover his lead," he explained, naively. "Me? No, I ain't hurt, barring my head where Archie hit me. I come round most as soon

as Charley hiked me inside. I've had her trained on Garraway ever since. Evening, gents!"

Salter chuckled delightedly.

"You two beat the very Old Harry. You don't want any nurse gal to look after you and mend your socks. Come on, we'll get off home. George, you and Sollum look me up in the morning. Maybe we can find a use for one another. Well, solong!"

On arrival at the house Heritage pleaded his aching limbs and betook himself to bed. First, however, motherly old Mrs. Salter insisted that he bathed his sore heels and apply some of her home-made ointment. Tired though he was he found it impossible to sleep. The night was warmish. Through the open window of his room came a gentle breath of air, full of the subtle fragrance of stirring spring. The moon had not yet risen, but in the faint light of the stars the plains glimmered softly as they swept onward to meet the black shadow of the timber belt. Away to the left hung a barely discernible curtain of mist, the ghostly exhalation from the turbid waters of Grey Lagoon.

For a long time Heritage sat by the window looking out into the quiet night. His mind was a curious jumble of tired thought. Events of the past few hours had brought home to his understanding more fully than ever before the seriousness of the venture to which he had definitely pledged himself. He knew himself to be about to face the first real struggle of his life, whereby his wit and courage would be tried to the breaking point. His glimpse of Slum Garraway and the men gathered about him convinced Heritage that a tremendous bitterness must inevitably be infused into the undertaking ahead. Men of the type to enlist the sympathy of Frame and Garraway would assuredly stop at nothing to attain the ends of their masters. They were, in a measure, typical of that vast bushland about them, that grim, stubborn forest which held them in mocking slavery to its every mood, even as they toiled and strained at its mighty timbers in puny, man-made ambition to conquer and destroy. The very nature of their desires, the very methods by which they worked, argued a phase of life almost brutal in its deliberate disregard of any recognised precedent. Convention became thrust aside as the coward plea of the weakling, and a man's ability to uphold first principles came in time to constitute his sole right to the recognition of his fellows.

Heritage's communing was suddenly interrupted by the

clear, liquid, almost melancholy notes of a bird calling from the black recesses of the bush. As the sound fluttered and died, there came to his ears a faint murmur of voices. A little silence fell. Then the deep, confident voice of Pete Diamond sounded clearly through the night.

"They's your bird calling, Jean. Remember the first time we heard them notes? It was the night after you and Peggy got home from your schooling in the city, and we was all standing inside the gate there talking over old times. Most every little while that bird comes to the edge of the timber and calls like that; jess as if it was glad you was home for good, and wanted you to know."

The girl's reply was inaudible. Then, as Heritage gently lowered his window, the cattleman spoke once more.

"You ain't a'worrying, eh, little girl? They ain't nothing ever going to hurt us. Why, it couldn't be so. I reckon that bird ain't jess lying when it sings of happiness like that. Why, if I was to lose you now . . . ."

Smiling sympathetically, yet with a curiously empty feeling at his heart, Heritage settled himself in a fresh attempt to sleep.

CHAPTER X

THROUGH the dingey curtains of butter-cloth stretched over the living-room windows of the Ferry house on the Bat River showed the faint light of a lamp. Seen in the grey dusk of evening the rambling buildings took on a more than sinister appearance. The crooked eaves and sagging roofs, the tottering verandah posts, the squalid atmosphere pervading every aspect of the place, seemed ripe to a suggestion of crime and violence. Even the light showing dimly within appeared to flicker stealthily, as if keeping cunning vigil over the disreputable spirit of the building.

As the shadows deepened without, a man came to the door and stood a moment peering out into the darkening prospect. Apparently satisfied by his scrutiny he presently withdrew, stamping noisily back along the narrow corridor to the living-room, where he seated himself with a surly denial.

" No, he ain't in sight yet, Tom. Maybe he'll show along in a minute or so. I never knew Hennessy to be late on a job of his own. Where's Sadie got herself to ? Sing out, she can fetch in the cards, will you ? "

Login made no effort to stir from his sprawling seat by the fire. Instead, he grinned across at Gus Rebner, sitting opposite.

" Call her yourself, daddy. She ain't my daughter. Anyways, we ain't got time for card playing."

" Well, suit yourself," said the other, ill-temperedly. He was an old man, grey and wrinkled as a badger, with shapeless nose and red-rimmed, cavernous eyes. He was coatless, but wore a dirty scarf twisted about his neck. His sleeves were rolled up to the elbows, disclosing a pair of boney, sunbrowned arms.

The silence that followed was broken by harsh laugh from Rebner. " That Heritage man has gone back to where he came from, they tell me. He knew a thing or two, he did. Left a couple of days back. Maybe he wasn't wise, eh ! " He focussed his pale-blue eyes on the ferryman. " What does Daddy Williams think about it ? We've missed

some fun. Slum had jess passed the word along to get busy with that city rat, when he clears out. My, we'd have salted him, eh! Them sort don't stand much."

"I never seen the feller," said Williams. "Weren't they some man he was tracking? I kind of remember hearing something."

"He give out he was looking for a man named Barkley," agreed Rebner. "It don't matter, I reckon. He was wise to leave when he did. They's no Barkley on Timber Bend."

Login seemed on the point of interjecting, but contented himself with drawing heavily at his pipe. His wide-set, squinting eyes held a curious glitter.

"Sadie, she reckons this Heritage weren't too bad a sort," volunteered the old ferryman, winking craftily at Rebner. "Seems like he got along all right with the Salters and Pete Diamond. Now you know Pete ain't making no friends with a police cop. I reckon that yarn come off the dust heap."

Rebner stamped his feet impatiently.

"If Hennessy ain't smart he'll hold us up till to-morrow night. Garraway won't stand for too much. We was away when that row come off with George Judney. Slum went crook. I'm glad we wasn't there. I ain't quite ready for Pete yet."

Williams bit his smile thoughtfully.

"You leave Pete alone, Gus. That man could wipe you off the earth once he got going. You know what they say about him down the coast? You let him be."

Rebner sneered.

"Maybe he was a holy terror once, but he ain't now. Once a man gets soft on a woman the way Pete is on Salter's girl, they ain't no more need to worry about him. Besides, ain't he in wrong with the police? A word from me, and they get him sure. I know it and he knows it. Him be damned."

Login rose to his feet with a yawn.

"I'm of to have a look around," he declared. "If Hennessy comes let me know."

As he went down the passage towards the back of the building he almost collided with Sadie Williams, who stepped suddenly from the door of the kitchen. At sight of the girl an impatient frown crossed Login's face.

"You're kind of foolish, Sadie, ain't you, hopping out on a man like that? It's your luck I knew it was you, else you might have got yourself hurt. I was coming to find you, anyway. Me and Gus want a nip before we start to-night."

The red-haired girl touched his arm timidly. Her big eyes were searching his face.

"I'll get you one in a minute. Tom . . . I want to talk to you. You haven't been near me for days. I've something to tell you. Come into the kitchen."

Some peculiarity of her manner seemed to impress Login for he choked back the refusal on his lips and followed her into the room. She closed the door after them.

"Well?" he asked.

For a moment she made no reply. For some reason Login experienced a difficulty in meeting her look. He began to fidget uneasily.

"Well, what is it?"

"It ain't well," said the girl, simply. "Tom, I'm wanting to tell you something, but it ain't easy. I been trusting you, ain't I?"

"I don't know what you mean," grumbled the section boss, but his mouth twitched a little at the corners.

A faint look of scorn came on Sadie's face.

"Yes you do. You promised you was going to marry me. Of course, I know you mean to, but when? You're going to, ain't you, Tom?"

Login grinned uncomfortably.

"Sure. You ain't worrying about that, eh? Only they ain't no particular need for hurry. Jess you wait awhile and we'll fix things the way you want."

She shook her head slowly.

"We won't wait any longer, I reckon. Can't . . . can't you understand? They's hurry enough."

The man continued to stare at her uncomprehendingly.

"Why? What's biting you now? If they's something you want to say, why don't you say it."

Her lips trembled but she made no reply. The blood rushed to her face as she lifted one hand to her bosom. Of a sudden Login bent forward and peered into her eyes. A startled oath escaped him.

"No? . . . you ain't meaning that, Sadie?"

She flashed into quick anger.

"But yes . . . yes . . . yes. D'you think I'd say that of myself if it wasn't so? Good God, how selfish men can be. You ain't thinking to turn me down? You're a'going to keep your promise. If I thought you was only playing with me . . ."

He caught her by the arm almost roughly.

"Suppose I was? What then? What d'you mean?"

Her mood changed swiftly. She put up her free arm and tried to draw his scowling face against her face. In her eyes was a desperate eagerness.

"Nothing . . . I didn't mean nothing. I'm kind of silly to-night. Tom . . . you love me? Say you love me! You ain't only been pretending. You couldn't do that. I ain't a bad girl. I never held no truck with any man but you. You're a'going to keep on loving me?"

But he continued to hold her off. His face was dark with angry suspicion.

"You finish your say first. You was meaning that if I didn't marry you, you was going to let on about Elbow Ridge. Was that it? You've got nerve for a woman, you have."

She pushed back the tangle of red hair from about her eyes, looking up at him steadily.

"Yes, I was. But I didn't mean it. D'you think I could do anything to hurt you? I was jess speaking foolish. A girl ain't quite . . . sensible, sometimes. Maybe you don't know what it feels like to know . . . to know . . ."

Login's frown relaxed a little. Ungraciously he suffered the caress she gave him.

"I ain't meaning to turn you down, Sadie. We'll get fixed all right, if you ain't impatient. It 'ud be kind of awkward jess now, though." His wide-set eyes looked round the room irritably. "I reckon I'd best go now. They's Hennessy come in. We'll talk things over next time I come."

Her arms dropped listlessly.

"I'm jess trusting you, Tom. Couldn't we go away somewhere soon, and start a home together like we always wanted? I can work. You know how I can work? You won't be waiting too long? I wouldn't like folks to get thinking I was that kind of a girl. They's Jean Salter now. I wished I was good like her . . . her and Peg Adaire. They been real good to me, them girls. I reckon I love them two. It 'ud kill me for them to find out. They wouldn't like me no more."

Login's face had flamed suddenly at mention of the names. There was almost hatred in the look he flashed at the unconscious speaker. He turned to the door abruptly.

"I said I'd fix things when I was ready. Now you forget to worry and ess trust to me. And mind and not get

talking. I ain't going to turn you down. What about that nip for Tom and me? It's time we was off."

The girl obeyed mechanically. Setting a row of tumblers on a tin tray she carried them into the living-room. Her appearance was greeted by an exclamation of impatience from her father.

"Get a move on, Sadie. Here's Hennessy with the stuff and half the night gone. Ain't you drinking?"

"Not to-night," said the girl, in a low voice. She looked towards Login, but he seemed to avoid her gaze. With a little sigh she turned away.

"If they's nothing more you want, I'm going to bed. I'm tired. Good-night."

As she went quietly from the room the ferryman grunted querulously. "Don't seem like she was well lately. I ain't only the one gal and don't want her getting sick. Who'd they be to do the work? You staying, Hennessy? You ain't? Well, here's how. You boys better get jigging, eh?"

Unseen, the red-haired girl watched the departure from the window of her bedroom. The pack-horse led by Login jibbed a little at the start and the man's coarse voice rang out in a string of angry oaths. Her father and Hennessy had gone to the yard rails. They stood there a moment, peering after the riders vanishing into the night. Then Hennessy mounted his own horse and rode homewards. The ferryman came inside, and the girl heard him pass grumblingly to his own room. In a brief while the place was wrapped in silence.

Sadie sat by the open window, her arms resting on the rough ledge, her eyes gazing wistfully into the night. The hours passed slowly, yet the girl made no effort to move. The dying moon set coldly behind a thick bank of clouds and the air took on the chill of approaching dawn. Only then did her ears catch the sound for which she had waited. With a little shiver she roused herself, dropping her stiffened arms from the window sill to pull the dingy curtains across the narrow opening. Clearly now on the still air sounded the clink of hoofs along the stony trail. Out of the darkness loomed the blurred figures of the returning riders. Crouching behind her flimsy cover the girl saw them come to a stop, heard the rasp and jingle of the pack harness as the man freed the weary horses and turned them loose. Not until she had heard Login and Rebner enter the house and silence

had settled once again, did Sadie rise. Then, fully clothed, she threw herself down on the bed and wrapping the coverlet over her shoulders closed her eyes in an effort to sleep.

At the first hint of daylight she rose again wearily and went out into the kitchen, where she kindled a fire on the open hearth. A little later when her father and Login stumbled sleepily from their beds they found the girl quietly preparing the breakfast.

Williams went immediately to the back door and looked up inquiringly at the brightening sky.

" Going to be fine, Tom," he volunteered wheezily. He gave himself a hasty sluice from a bucket of water drawn from the iron tank standing outside, and returned dripping in search of a towel. " Ain't Gus up yet ? You've no time to waste, either of you. Brekfus set, Sadie ? "

The girl nodded silently. Her eyes followed Login as he moved grumblingly about the kitchen. He called sharply to Rebner.

" Come out of that, Gus. Garraway 'll be telling us off if we ain't on time."

Not waiting an answer he seated himself at the table. When Rebner joined them the meal was half over.

" Trying for your beauty sleep this morning, Gus ? " asked the ferryman, leering facetiously. " My, you 'uns ain't like we was in my young days. I never seen my bed by daylight."

Rebner looked at the old man with surly impatience.

" Hush up, will you, Daddy. I'm that tired I could sleep the clock round. I ain't slave to no man. Garraway can wait."

Throughout the meal Login appeared hardly to notice Sadie. As he went out at the door, however, he met her eyes for a fleeting second. He called back over his shoulder.

" I'll be along again next Saturday, most like."

The girl made no reply. She stood looking after the two men for so long that her father was moved to waspish rebuke.

" Ain't you nothing better to do than stand staring all day, Sadie ? They's work and all to get through. Me being short-handed at the punt most likely I'll want you to help a spell. Gosh, you ain't struck on one of them two, eh ? Tom ain't no ladies' man, anyhow. Let him be."

As she turned quietly away, the old man chuckled harshly. He failed to notice the sudden whitening of her face, the

quick, almost gasping heave of her bosom. Grumbling, he went to his work.

It was late when Login and Rebner reached the tramline. Garraway came out of his office to meet them. He was in anything but a good humour.

"It beats all where you two get to when I want you." He looked sharply at Login, but the squat section boss returned the gaze unwinking. "You boys ain't playing me fair. You get good money and I look to you to be here on time. Ain't been boozing up, have you? Not that I care what you do. But there's been some liquor getting into camp lately, so I hear. That sort of thing will have to stop. You know what Frame threatened to do to any man hitting a jag at the mill. He wants no fire burning him out. If the old man could hit on the man that's peddling the grog on the line here, he'd rouse hell out of him. Well, get busy."

He returned to his figuring. Login, with a faint grin at Gus Rebner, moved off to join his gang. Presently he arrived at a turn of the line where stood a steam winch with long steel cable snaking away into the bush. The engine-driver greeted him with an oath of relief.

"That gum butt we started on last night is making trouble. She fouls somewhere every time, and the cable don't wind clear. Maybe you can think of something, Tom."

Login accompanied the man through the bush to where a small group laboured over the recalcitrant tree. The section boss ran his eyes thoughtfully over the gear and he spat disgustedly.

"Who's your dodger?"

He glared angrily at the man indicated by the engine-man's grimy forefinger.

"You, Britten? What's the matter with you? Can't you steer better than that?"

"I hurt my leg," said the man sullenly. "I done my best, but I couldn't make the pace. She gets ahead of me."

Login shook a fist in the other's face.

"It's your business to see she don't. Another break like that and I send you to Garraway to get your time. Get a fresh chain over the butt and mind your dogs grip. And see your line ain't fouling. A hell of a driver you are."

Back at the winch the engineman tautened his cable afresh. Login bent over the huge log, taking final stock of

the gear. Straightening himself he squinted along the haulage track and threw one arm upright. At the signal the cable stiffened and began to wind. The tree spun round, hung a second, then plunged forward with a rasping whine. By the side of it ran the dodger, his eyes fixed on the path ahead, his bar held in readiness for instant action.

Login, after seeing the butt settled in place on the skidway, plunged on through the bush to his felling gang. All day long the woods echoed to the blow of axe and maul, the slurring zip-zip of the saws, the rattle of trucks, the crashing reverberation of falling timber. When dusk came the men trooped wearily back to camp. Fires began to flicker along the banks of the creek. Snatches of rough song broke the brooding quietness of the night. The air became heavy with the odour of burning tallow-weed and musk.

Garraway was standing by the door of the big mess hut when Login came up. He held some papers in his hand.

" I've had my tea, Tom. You and Gus see to things till I come back. I've some mail to post and then I'm off to the Ferry to learn the news. Sambell's got a mob coming in to-night. If I'm not back by morning keep on with the cut as you're going. Frame wants that corner cleaned right up. By the way, you don't know what's become of Sollum and Judney, eh ? No ! Well, I heard they were camped at Salters'. I put Archie Gatton on cooking and the boys say he's all right so far. Those two fools killed a good job."

He stalked off and the darkness swallowed him up. Login hunted round till he found Rebner.

" Garraway's gone to the Ferry. He says he may not be back till the morning." Login grinned and made a little gesture with his long arms.

Rebner nodded with a satisfied air. Together they entered the hut and ate their tea. Going out again Login halted in the doorway and looked round at the assembled men.

" Garraway's jess been complaining to me that they's been some grog getting into this camp," he said slowly. " I ain't seen any myself ; but there it is. The boss reckons to give the tip."

He paused a moment, his eye meeting that of the nearest man with a meaning twinkle.

" Of course, we don't aim to interfere with any man lucky enough to find something stronger than water to wet his

neck with, so long as he don't get to advertising himself." A grin spread over his flat features. " Of course the whole thing's silly. They ain't any booze in this camp, and never was. Where in hell would it come from, anyway ? Tell me that. You boys, you're all right."

Without noticing the little ripple of amused understanding that came on the faces of his hearers, Login crossed over to his sleeping tent and seating himself on a stump by the door, filled and lighted his pipe. Here he was presently joined by Rebner. In silence they watched the rest of the men file out of the hut. In a little while the place was deserted except for themselves and Archie Gatton, the new hut-keeper, who went muttering about his work. After a time he too came out and vanished swiftly in the wake of his comrades.

Rebner peered through the dark towards his friend.

" Who's handling the stuff ? " he asked abruptly.

" That big Swede, Larsen," said Login. He cocked his head to one side, listening. Apparently satisfied, he resumed. " Chris ain't no swiper himself and I can handle him easy. I got to find out where he comes from and why, and he knows I know. He won't talk. I've told him it's all c. o. d. this time. I reckon he's big enough to hold the boys off till I get along."

The two men smoked on in silence. Suddenly Rebner rose to his feet with a muttered oath. On the still night had broken out a confused sound of shouting. It died down as abruptly as it had begun. Rebner looked at his companion uncertainly.

" I'd hop along, Gus, if I was you," said Login presently. He struck a match and looked at the watch on his belt. " Maybe they're all right, but it don't do to run risks. Tell some of them blobs they'll need to walk to Green Valley next time they get a thirst up, if they don't act reasonable. You know what Garraway is ! "

Left to himself Login smoked on stolidly. Perhaps a quarter of an hour had passed when a sudden crackling movement in the bush at his back made him face round with every nerve tautened. The sound came closer. Noiselessly Login backed behind an angle of the tent and stood there motionless, watching. Despite his bulk the squat timber man had made no sound. There was something cat-like in the crouch of his body, the agile set of his long arms,

The sounds proceeding from the bushes, at first indefinite, took on the character of stumbling foot-falls. They approached, receded, approached once more. Followed a little period of seeming hesitation. Then the bushes parted and the shadowy figure of a man stumbled into the clear space about the tent.

Login, peering into the dark with hostile eyes, drew a sudden sharp breath of relief. His poise relaxed and he stepped forward with a little impatient exclamation. The dimly seen figure of the new comer broke into anxious speech.

"Who is that? Is that Mr. Garraway?"

"No, it ain't. It's me . . . Tom Login. How'd you come along this way, Mr. Adaire? Got yourself bushed?

Adaire dropped on the log with a tired sigh. He laughed faintly. "It's you, Login, is it? Yes, I was bushed like any new chum. I can't tell you how relieved I was to find evidence of your camp. At my age one doesn't fancy a night in the scrub. Besides, my little girl at home would be dreadfully anxious if I failed to turn up. She will be anxious as it is."

"What was you doing to get bushed?" asked Login. The queer inflexion in his voice caused the old man to look at him in surprised fashion.

"Why, I was doing nothing in particular, I believe," returned Adaire slowly. "I went out for a walk and fell to dreaming. I sometimes do, you know. It is a habit of mine which I cannot recommend to my friends. Occasionally —as for instance, to-night—the result is disastrous. I lost my way completely. Even now I not sure where I am; only that this is some part of the tramline and here, presumably, your own camp. I wonder would one of your men set me on the track for home. In the daylight I could manage, no doubt; but at night . . . My eyesight is not very good."

"Your luck's clean out," said Login. "They ain't no one handy but me. The mob's gone along to the ten-mile. Only someone has to mind camp I reckon I'd have been with them."

He uttered the lie unblinkingly, well knowing there was no fear of contradiction. Adaire was frankly distressed. He rose to his feet hesitatingly.

'I must do the best I can then by myself. If you would point the direction ."

Login had been doing some rapid thinking. Now, under cover of the dark, a grin of cunning came on his face. He took hold of Adaire's thin arm in rough pretence at friendliness. His voice lost its surly intonation.

"I reckon maybe I'll tote you along home myself. I was going to say so when you cut in. I'm tired right enough; but, seeing it's you, I don't mind. It ain't far, anyhow."

"That's very kind of you," said the old man. He added almost immediately, however, in a tone of weary surprise, "But then I thought you said you had to mind camp? I don't want to be too much of a nuisance, you know."

For the moment Login appeared at a loss.

"That's so," he admitted. "Well, it don't matter for the once. I'm pretty well my own boss. If they's any kick coming, I reckon I can stand it."

Adaire made no further objection. It was plain to see that his chief concern was to reach home before his absence caused anxiety. He replied to Login in monosyllables. In the end the section boss was forced to give over his attempt to converse. He relapsed into a sullen silence. At Adaire's gate they halted. The old man looked at him hesitatingly.

"I'm very much obliged to you, Tom. You must be tired yourself. Would you . . . that is, I thought perhaps you might care to step inside and rest yourself before returning to camp. Maybe you'd like some supper?"

His tone was far from inviting, but Login grasped at the offer greedily. He reached out his hand and swung open the gate.

"Why, sure I will, if it ain't troubling you too bad."

At the eagerness in the rough voice Adaire paused a second time, seeming to peer at him doubtfully. He led the way slowly to the house. Login followed, grinning. His elation, however, received a check at sight of Jean Salter bending over the work table in the sitting-room.

On the appearance of her father, Peggy Adaire ran forward and threw her arms about the old man's neck. She began to chide at him softly.

"Daddy, daddy . . . where have you been? We were getting anxious about you. Explain yourself, sir. Jean, how does one punish a bad father?"

Despite the raillery there was genuine relief in the girl's voice. Her hands trembled a little as she helped him out of his great coat. Adaire dropped into his chair with a sigh of content.

" Hide his pipe and tobacco for a week," said Jean, with a laugh. " If you want a male thing to be perfectly miserable, I can recommend that treatment. Smokers only, of course."

" I've been bushed," said the old man, rather shamefacedly. " Actually I didn't know where I was. Only that I fortunately stumbled on to the tramline, I might have had . . . ." He broke off, suddenly remembering his escort. " Why, Tom ! Won't you sit down awhile ? "

Until that moment it is doubtful if either of the girls had been fully aware of Login's presence, so occupied were they with Adaire. On a recognition of the visitor they eyed each other perplexedly. Unseen, save by her friend, Jean wrinkled her nose in comical disgust.

Login had been standing just inside the door. At Adaire's words he came forward with a clumsy greeting.

" Evening, Miss Peggy. Evening, Jean."

Following the one perfunctory glance around the neat room his wide-set eyes came back to Peggy's face in a stare of admiration. There was something so repellent in the look that the girl coloured and turned aside hurriedly.

Jean Salter broke an uneasy silence.

" Good-evening, Mr. Login ! How is Sadie ? We have not seen anything of her for quite a time. She is well, I hope ? "

Unwittingly she had voiced the one question calculated to disturb the man's brutish complaisance. His face flamed angrily.

" Well enough, I suppose. Why ast me ? She ain't of no particular interest, that I knows of."

Jean returned his gaze coolly. She saw that she had somehow annoyed him, and wondered why.

" Indeed ! I understood that you were engaged to be married. In the circumstances it was natural enough to take your interest for granted."

" Well, we ain't," denied Login bluntly. He shifted in his seat uncomfortably.

" Then I beg your pardon," said Jean. In spite of a growing indignation she managed to speak quietly. Her instinct told her that something was wrong somewhere, yet what it could be she was unable to determine. In her heart she rejoiced over Login's denial. She had a real affection for Sadie Williams. She had never quite understood the evident liking of the red-headed girl for this brutish man before her.

" Tom was kind enough to bring me home," interjected Adaire, a trifle hastily. " I thought we might offer him some supper before he returned to camp."

Glad of an excuse to absent herself Peggy rose immediately. To Login's ill-concealed disappointment she closed the kitchen door after her. He turned sourly to Adaire.

" I hear that Heritage has gone back to where he come from. You must be glad ! "

Adaire looked at him quickly.

" I don't know that I understand you. Mr. Heritage has certainly returned to Melbourne, but I do not know that the fact affords me pleasure."

He paused as if in doubt. The thin hand raised to shield his eyes from the glare of the lamp appeared to tremble slightly.

" On the contrary, I am sorry. I found much to admire in Jack Heritage."

Login grinned.

" Did you ? "

Jean flashed him an indignant glance. He saw it, and his eyes glinted maliciously.

" I liked him very much," said Adaire quietly.

" That's kind of strange, ain't it ? Still they's no accounting for taste," said Login. He looked at the old man queerly. " Now me, I put that Heritage down as a first-class blob. Right from the start I had him placed. He comes round here saying he's trailing a man called Barkley, but he don't find him. In a way, that's a lucky thing for Barkley . . . supposing there is a Barkley."

Adaire made no reply.

" I do not think Mr. Heritage means anything but good towards the man he seeks," said Jean, spiritedly. " Why should you suggest otherwise ? "

Login ignored her rudely. He continued to eye the thin figure of Adaire intently.

" Why, yes ; I should certainly say that man Barkley's luck was in, eh, Phil ? " He licked his lips, framing the lie in his mind. " Heritage as good as told me it was a hanging matter, if they found Barkley."

To Jean's distressed fancy the shoulders of the old man at her side appeared to heave suddenly. She bent towards him anxiously.

" Why, Mr. Adaire, you're shivering. You havn't caught

cold? Come now, off to bed, and let Peggy bring you a drink of something nice and hot."

Before Adaire could answer—if indeed he had meant to—Login's rough voice struck in again. His growing malice made him careless of anything but a sudden fierce desire to wound these people whose dislike of himself, studiously repressed though it was, could hardly be mistaken.

"That's right. A drop of hot grog's the thing. Now if you was down on the tramline . . . but maybe they's plenty here too. Someone's making a pot of money handing liquor out to the boys." Login winked deliberately at Jean. "Quicker'n working for wages, eh? 'Specially when they's someone waiting to hit the marriage market. It's a dirty game—peddling sly booze, and a risky one, but it certainly brings in the cash."

The girl's face was strangely troubled. She was breathing quickly.

Login dropped his voice to a husky whisper.

"Seen Pete Diamond around lately, Jean?"

It was impossible to mistake the brutal inference. Jean turned on him in a blaze of indignation.

"How dare you? How dare you suggest such an abominable lie? Pete Diamond would never dream of soiling himself in such a traffic. Only a coward would accuse a man behind his back. If Pete knew what you have said he would kill you. You . . . you vile creature!"

Before the scorn of her blue eyes the squat section boss sat in snarling silence. What more he might have said was interrupted by the entry of Peggy with a tray of cups. He drank his coffee sullenly. More than once he tried to catch Peggy's eye, but the girl steadfastly refused to look at him. Jean Salter ignored him absolutely.

"Well, I'll be getting along," he said. "Seems like I ain't over popular hereabouts."

Neither of the girls noticed his departure. Only Phil Adaire met his scowl with a timid commonplace. In the old man's faded eyes was something almost appealing. When Login had gone he sank into his chair broodingly.

"I never wish to see that brute again," declared Jean abruptly, after a little silence. "If the devil ever assumes human shape we've entertained him to-night. Beast!"

Peggy gave a little shudder. Her eyes looked almost frightened. "He is a horrible man. He . . . he looks

at me sometimes . . . I think he would be capable of any wickedness. Jean, won't you be afraid to go home? Hadn't you better stay overnight with us?"

Jean laughed reassuringly.

"Father will call for me. In any case Login dare not harm me. Why, Pete . . . Pete would . . . you know what Pete would do to him." Her reliance on the big cattleman was absolute. Her eyes glowed at the thought of his splendid strength and courage. Not in all the world could there be the equal of her giant lover. She said again, with a kind of awe, "Why, Pete would *kill* Login!"

Peggy sat herself on the arm of her father's chair

"Daddy, whatever possessed you to bring Login here? Don't you know he is a bad man?"

"What would you call a bad man?" asked the old man. in an absent voice.

"Why, Login," said Peggy, with feminine logic. "One who robs, and cheats, and lies—yes, and kills, if need be But not in fair fight. Login is such a man!"

Adaire looked up at her. A swift spasm of emotion crossed his face. He put his hand to his eyes wearily.

"Yes, I believe that. Login would murder, if he could escape the consequences. Yet . . . even killing is sometimes justifiable."

A shrill whistle sounded outside the house. Jean rose to her feet and tied a shawl hastily about her head. She bent and kissed the old man affectionately.

"There's father. Now Mr. Adaire, off to bed for a good night's rest. You're tired and dispirited. Peggy will see me to the gate. Good-night!"

When Peggy returned the sitting-room was vacant. She closed and locked the doors and windows. Then she tiptoed softly down the passage to her father's room and peeped in. She had thought to find the old man already in bed, waiting her good-night kiss. Instead, he was kneeling by the window seat, his grey head bowed on his arms. Even as she looked he roused slightly. She saw that he held something in his hand—a long, gleaming tress of hair. A little groan escaped his lips.

Very quietly the girl closed the door and went on to her own bedroom. In her heart was a great longing, a passionate cry for some memory of her dead mother. Tears trembled in her eyes. It was long before sleep came to soothe her bewildered grief.

CHAPTER XI

HERITAGE'S trip back to the mainland proved uneventful. Within an hour of berthing he surprised his partner by clattering into the office and falling upon him with enthusiasm. Colvin pushed him into a chair and proceeded to look him over affectionately.

"Well, upon my word, if it isn't Johnny. Where did you come from? Have you run your man to earth then? Let's see—you've been absent a matter of two months nearly. In all that time you've written twice only. Had a good time? But I can see you have. You're as brown as a piece of wattle bark. And where is Barkley? Got him in irons in a cab outside?"

"Stop your chaffing, Bob," laughed Heritage. "No, I havn't found Barkley yet. But I mean to. As for having written you so very infrequently, if you knew how busy I've been, and what a job there is ahead of me, you wouldn't wonder at that."

Colvin lapsed into gravity.

"Well, but if you haven't got Barkley what made you return. You don't mean to say you were getting home-sick?"

"Now don't be cross," pleaded the young man eagerly. "I tell you what it was, Bob. I couldn't let you know I was coming because I didn't know it myself until it was time to start. Wait until you hear all about things. I want your advice badly. I'm in it up to my neck. Listen now!"

Colvin heard him through without comment. At the finish, however, he pursed his lips disapprovingly. His eyes looked troubled.

"Granted everything is as you say, Johnny," he said slowly, "is it wise, do you think, to buck yourself against such men as Sam Frame? I'd like to see it the way you do, but experience has made me hesitate to touch anything I don't fully understand. And I don't understand the timber

industry. Neither do you. Frame knows the ins and outs of the business a thousand times better than you or I would ever hope to. I don't like it."

"Granted we know nothing, what about Salter?" defended the young man swiftly. "I tell you, Bob, Salter knows the game from A to Z."

"He needs to. If you fail it will mean ruination to these new friends of yours . . . if not to yourself. Have you thought of that?"

But Heritage refused to be discouraged. Something of the vigour and stubbornness of the great forest from which he was newly come had already suffused itself into his being. He laughed almost scornfully.

"Fail! We shan't fail. We *can't* fail. You don't know Pete Diamond, or the Salters, or the Adaires. I tell you, Bob, those people are just splendid. And then again the right of the matter is all with us. Is it fair, is it even decent, that Frame and his associates should rule the roost? These folks born and bred on the coast, that know every inch of the country, that spend their lives toiling in the outback . . . what of them? Have they no share in the natural resources of their country? Must they always stand aside for the rank outsider? Look here, Bob, the big men operating around Timber Bend are what Salter calls them—timber wolves. They recognise no kindliness, no charity. They know no law but their own greed. It is no wild exaggeration that pictures them as the wild beasts of commerce; men who for money's sake would rend the flesh of even their dearest and best. Thank God, all are not alike. There are straight-goers, even in business. But these men controlling Timber Bend are the moral outcasts of the trade. I would spend my last penny to thwart them."

In the face of such enthusiasm Colvin was powerless. He was forced to throw up a hand to try to stem the tide of his friend's eloquence.

"Upon my soul, Johnny, you're climbing out of your shell with a vengeance. I'd dearly love for some of these church-going rogues you speak of to hear your opinion of them. No sane man would doubt the truth of your indictment. There are wasters in every walk of life. The trouble is that modern society is more or less of a humbug. Ours is a money-worshipping age. We judge by externals. We substitute a bank pass-book for the Bible, and seldom care to see beyond the gilt on a man's watch-chain." He shrugged his thin

shoulders and smiled resignedly. " Well, I suppose you're already committed to this hare-brained scheme. The question now is, what do you want *me* to do ? I suppose I must hang with the rest of you ! "

Heritage grabbed at his partner's hand and shook it heartily. " You're a trump, Bob. I knew I could make you see things our way. As for what we expect you to do, well, I'm not quite sure yet where you come in. I've got sense enough to know that it won't do for the firm to appear openly in this matter. As a matter of fact, I think you had better appear to disown me entirely. We'll talk things over later."

" How will you stand with Frame now ? " asked Colvin, curiously. " He doesn't know yet, of course ? "

Heritage made a wry face.

" He will soon. Believe me or not, Bob, I don't care a dump what he thinks. I've been disappointed in that man."

Colvin grinned.

" If I wanted to be nasty, I should say ' I told you so.' So you are coming at last to see that Sam Frame has another and nastier side ? I wondered how long it would take you. By the way, have you reflected that Winifred Frame will not unnaturally resent your new attitude towards her father. Will it matter, Johnny ? "

Heritage coloured, but met his partner's gaze steadily.

" If you had asked me that a month ago, Bob, I might have said yes. As it is, I'm not so sure."

" I see," said Colvin.

To himself he was saying " Oho, so he's met some other girl, has he ? " Immediately he set himself to the task of pumping an admission from his friend. The task proved comparatively easy in such expert hands.

" Well, suppose you tell me something about Timber Bend. Not too many young folks there, eh ? You must have found the society rather uncongenial. Worthy man though he is the dweller outback must of necessity be found lacking in those essentials to pleasant society which you and I are accustomed to."

He paused a moment, smiling craftily.

" Generally speaking, I found the settler to be stupid and quite noticeably ill-informed, not to say illiterate. The men, of course, were the worst. Yet the poor women . . . considering the kind of existence they are forced to lead,

one can hardly expect them to be other than round-shouldered and sloppy. No refinement is possible. Now when I . . ."

"Will you hush up," burst out Heritage indignantly. "You may know something about law but, upon my soul, Bob, your idea of the folk outback is absolutely rotten. You'd be surprised at some of the people I've met lately. Unsociable! Illiterate! Unrefined! God bless my soul, you don't know what you're talking about. Why, Jean Salter, for instance, is one of the most charmingly gentle, refined girls I have ever met. You think people outback are content to grub along any old way. You're wrong. Both those girls were at college for years, and . . ."

"Both which girls?" asked Colvin calmly. "I only heard you speak of one."

Heritage glared at the interruption.

"You couldn't have been listening. I said that both Jean Salter and Peggy Adaire were at college for years. How does Peggy Adaire strike you for a name, anyhow? Anything unrefined or illiterate about that, eh? She's the most beautiful girl I ever saw, and her nature is as lovely as her face. And sing! She's a second Melba. Bob, it would do you good just to see her."

Colvin bent over and patted the young man's arm soothingly. "You're getting a bit mixed, Johnny, ain't you? Which girl is it that is beautiful? Is it the one that sings, or the other one. I seem to remember that you spoke of two. And which one is it you would like me to see. You'd make a rotten witness, old chap."

"I was talking of Peggy Adaire, confound you," began. Heritage exasperatedly. He suddenly caught his partner's eye and came to a full stop, reddening furiously.

Colvin broke into a chuckle of delight.

"Confound you," said Heritage again. "I believe you've been pulling my leg all this time."

"Caught you, Johnny; caught you fairly," said the older man, this time laughing outright. "Come, don't be cross with me. I just had to confirm my suspicions." His eyes suddenly became very kind. "Tell me all about her, boy. Is she so very wonderful then?"

"The most wonderful girl in the world," said Heritage simply. "Bob, Peggy Adaire is one of God's women, as they say. And I . . . damn it, old man, I'm head over heels in love with her."

"Who is she? I mean, who are her folks?" asked Colvin, after a little embarrassed pause.

"I don't know. She lives with her father. I understand that her mother died some years ago. Does it matter?"

"Well, well," uttered Colvin, back to his every-day, expressionless tones once more. "Johnny, you must tell me more about her. For the present I'm going to be busy. We'll go into this timber affair of yours to-morrow. What are you going to do now?"

"Ring Frame up and get it over," said the young man promptly. "Anyone in my own room? Right! I can use the 'phone there then."

Back in his office he carefully closed the door and then called up a number on the telephone. One of Frame's clerks answered him.

"Is Mr. Frame in? I see. Is he disengaged?"

"Who's speaking?"

"Tell him it's Jack Heritage. It's important, if you don't mind."

The clerk appeared still to hesitate.

"I shan't keep him a moment," assured the young man.

"I'll put you through then," called the clerk.

Apparently he was as good as his word, for a second later Heritage heard Frame's big voice calling over the wire.

"It's Heritage, Mr. Frame," he said in reply. "May I call at your house to-night, please? I want to see you particularly."

There was a moment's silence.

"Why?" asked the timber man bluntly.

"There are several things I want to explain. I wouldn't bother you unnecessarily, Mr. Frame. I think you know that. May I call?"

"I hardly see the necessity," returned Frame evenly.

"It will be to the advantage of us both," persisted Heritage. "I shan't ask for much of your time."

"Very well, then," he heard Frame snap. "Eight o'clock this evening, at my house. Only get this into your head before you come, and it might save you a lot of talking. I'm through with you, young man. If I hear what you have to say it is only because I'm better tempered than some people think."

He appeared to slam the receiver on the hook and ring off almost in Heritage's ear. The young man grinned a trifle nervously, but his eyes were unafraid. He knew himself

committed too deeply to back down now, even had he wanted to. And he did not want to. He was more than ever determined to go through with the business.

As he went along the corridor Colvin called to him suddenly. Heritage poked his head inside the door.

" You want me, Bob ? "

His partner was regarding the ceiling with twinkling eyes. " I do. In the excitement of our reunion we appear to have completely overlooked the original business which took you to Timber Bend. Did you, or did you not, find out anything about Barkley ? Take your time about answering, Johnny. I wouldn't rattle you for the world."

" Nothing definite," confessed Heritage. " He's there, all the same. I'm convinced of it. Why, I couldn't tell you ; but I know it is so. Someone over there will drop a hint one day, and there you are."

" Humph ! One more question and you can run away and amuse the world of finance trying to raise capital to fight the ogre Frame. Did you tell people your reason for wanting to find Barkley ? "

" I did not," said Heritage. " It seemed to me that to advertise my business too fully was simply to lay myself open to imposture. Barkleys would crop up along my path like mushrooms. You agree with that ? "

" All right. You're running the show for the present." Colvin brought his eyes from the ceiling and smiled sadly. " Well, goodbye, Jack the Giant Killer. And I used to think myself a business man ! "

A little before eight o'clock that evening Heritage swung open the gate of Frame's garden and walked up the drive towards the well-remembered house. Despite his utmost he had to confess to a feeling of nervousness. Now that he was to meet the timber man, face to face, all sorts of doubts assailed him. Standing under the porch he found his mouth suddenly dry, and the hand raised to press the electric bell trembling slightly. For a second a kind of panic seized him, so that he had all he could do to restrain himself from incontinent flight. Gradually his courage re-asserted itself. Memory conjured up the fat, smiling, hopeful face of Charley Salter, as it had appeared beside the coach on the morning of his departure from Green Valley. In some mysterious manner the parting words of the stout cattle-dealer reproduced themselves in his ears.

" This ain't a fight only for ourselves, that we're putting

up, Jack. It's a fight for the smaller men all over Australia. It's a fight of right against might ; a fight for the underdog ; for them we love ; for the little children yet to be born. Get that into your head and keep it there. We're twentieth century crusaders, and don't you forget it."

Heritage remembered how the oddness of the last sentence had made him smile and wonder where the stout man had obtained his comparison. He felt his heart suddenly warm to the work before him. These people back in the big timber were trusting him absolutely. To fail them would be a crime unthinkable. They were his friends, his partners.

The thought steadied him at once. He raised his hand and punched the door-bell with almost violence. Strangely enough at that moment the huge clock in the hall within struck the hour. The loud, clanging notes reached him even through the thick door, seeming to echo the challenge of his thoughts. So might a knight of old have sounded his trumpet as he entered the lists to do deadly battle against his foes. From across the water Peggy Adaire's clear eyes appeared to smile suddenly, even as the eyes of some dead and gone beauty might have smiled encouragingly towards some doughty knight of old.

It was a quaint conceit, and he was still smiling gently as he entered Frame's study. The timber man was sitting at his desk. At sight of Heritage he rose and held out his hand. The action surprised the young man. He had expected a more or less surly greeting. Frame evidently read the thought, for he laughed shortly.

" I see no reason so far to honour you with my personal dislike," he rumbled. " Refusing to shake hands with you wouldn't do you any harm nor me any good. Well, you wanted to see me. If you think you have any chance of explaining the trick you played me, why, go ahead. I can give you fifteen minutes. At the same time, I might as well tell you that you're not likely to do yourself any good. The way you went back on your promise was contemptible. I can't see any excuse that will fit."

Heritage looked at the old man steadily, though with rising colour.

" I'm not here to defend any action of mine, Mr. Frame. However, I should like to remind you that you gave me your confidence unasked. You exacted my promise unfairly. When I learnt something of the true facts of the case I could do no less than recall that promise. However, that can

hardly matter now. You must judge as you think fit. I came here to-night not to defend the past, but to give you fair warning of the future. But before I explain myself, I want you to know that I am not ungrateful for the many kindnesses I have received at your hands. I can only ask you to believe that I do not oppose you for anything less vital than a matter of principle."

Frame was regarding him through half closed eyes. There was an air of amused tolerance, almost contempt, in the way he yawned at the conclusion of the remark.

"Well?" he asked carelessly.

Heritage got a grip of his courage.

"Mr. Frame, I'm going into the timber business for myself."

If Frame felt any astonishment or resentment on receipt of this bald statement, he masked his emotions admirably. Not by the flicker of an eyelid did he betray himself. Heritage had expected some swift show of anger, but none came. Instead, Frame merely repeated his former query.

"Well?"

The utter indifference in the big voice shook the young man's confidence more hardly than the most violent display of anger. For a second he could only stare at Frame uneasily, at a loss to continue.

"I said I was going into the timber trade on my own account," he repeated. "I suppose the fact can hardly interest you very much, after all. I want you to know, however, that the decision is quite recent; I had no intention whatever of such a purpose, when last I saw you. I want to be fair and above board. I want you to know . . ."

Frame banged a fist on the table with almost startling suddenness. His attitude of indifference had vanished completely. He leant forward in his chair, his eyes snapping.

"Bah . . . cut out the whine. I'm not your father confessor to listen while you cant and snivel and humbug. Be honest. I'm only interested in a man's actions. I don't care a damn what his motives are. You're going into the timber trade. Why? Give me a straight answer, or none at all."

The words, no less than the action, supplied a needed whip to the young man's confidence. He felt his own anger rise swiftly. With difficulty he choked back the hot retort which rose to his lips.

"You make it hard for me to continue. I'm trying to

give you a straight answer, as you call it. I'm going into the trade for a matter of principle, and that alone."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Mr. Frame," said Heritage earnestly. "I certainly do. I don't really care a snap of the fingers for the money in the game, although I believe it to be not inconsiderable. The fact of the matter is this. The big firms, the established firms, deny the right of the small man to compete. They resent his effort to obtain a share of what is his by all the laws of decency and justice. The man who has lived his life in the very shadow of the forest that you big men lay waste with all the recklessness of greed, is forced to stand aside and see his inheritance despoiled without one iota of redress. He dare not compete. Should he attempt to do so, you strangle him remorselessly. In a hundred ways you hound him to financial death; sometimes—God forgive you—to actual death of the body. Tasman Perkins was only one of your victims."

"You have the damned impudence to accuse me of that?" asked Frame hoarsely.

"I accuse you of nothing," retorted Heritage. "Your own conscience takes the place of prosecutor, Mr. Frame. I'm going into this business to prove that it can be run on decent lines. I'm going into it with my eyes wide open, knowing full well the sort of opposition I shall have to face. If I fail, I fail. At least I shall have the satisfaction of knowing that I fought cleanly and openly. But I shan't fail, I shall win. And if I win, so shall others that come after me. That's all I want to say."

Frame's face was purple with anger. He half rose out of his seat. For a single second Heritage thought the old man meant to strike him.

"So that's it? Bah, what a canting pup you have come to be. And a liar . . . God, what a liar. You're going into the timber trade because you think there's big money in it. That, and that alone, is your reason. The rest of your talk is only a sop to your conscience. You're after the cash. You think there's a fortune to be made. And so there is. But not for you. You poor fool, I'll break you in a single season. I'll put you down and out like rotten log. You think you can play me the trick that you did, and then come here and abuse me to my face and whine about the purity of your own motives, and yet get out on both your feet? . . . I tell you that not a penny of

promotors' capital shall go your way. I'll queer you with every money market in Australasia. I'll squeeze you till your soul sweats pure blood. I'll . . ."

He fell back in his chair panting, his face so congested with angry blood that Heritage started towards him in alarm. Frame struck him away.

" Get out of my house. Get out of my house. God . . . if I was twenty years younger I'd smash you with my hands."

For a second Heritage almost wavered in his purpose. The timber man presented such a picture of outraged innocence that for one horrible moment the younger man wondered if he were not mistaken after all, if Frame were not justified in what he had said. The mood passed as swiftly as it had come. He rose to his feet.

" I'm going now, Mr. Frame ! " Heritage looked at the old man almost wistfully. " I'm sorry you feel like this about things. I suppose it's no use asking to see Win before I go ? "

He waited a moment, but no reply was forthcoming. Heritage passed silently out of the room.

For a full five minutes Frame sat glaring at the closed door. Then he rose heavily from his chair and stood with his hands spread on the polished surface of the table. He began to mutter aloud.

" Rice ? no good ! Can't keep his mouth shut. Corrigan ? he's little better ! They must go. Kent ? I don't altogether trust Kent. James ? I should have thought of James first. James can handle this. I'll speak to James. The damned young puppy."

With a trembling hand he reached the receiver from the telephone on his desk.

CHAPTER XII

WHATEVER doubt Heritage may have had as to Frame's ability to make good his threat was quickly dispelled. As the days fled and his hopes of raising the capital he needed remained still unrealised, the young man was seriously perturbed. He interviewed man after man. In every case the result was negative. He was received courteously enough, it is true. Men listened to what he had to say and politely regretted their inability to advance the capital he asked for. It appeared to Heritage, doggedly persevering, that he had only need to mention his name and business to ensure an atmosphere, if not directly hostile, at least suspiciously non-committal.

At first Heritage was merely puzzled to account for his lack of success. Later, a growing sensation of fear began to gnaw at the roots of his confidence. Imperceptibly he began to lose courage. He knew his proposition to be both sound and convincing. Yet bit by bit he found himself hedged around by a blank wall of refusal. In all this he presently began to see the hand of Sam Frame. The timber king was making good his boast. He was closing the money market against him. It seemed incredible that one man could so rule a community; yet so it was. Never till then had Heritage realised the power of his opponent. With the knowledge came an overwhelming sense of humiliation. From the very beginning he was beaten. And the folk at Timber Bend had staked their all on his bare promise.

He came one morning to the office after a sleepless night, and showed his partner so haggard a face that Colvin became seriously alarmed for his health.

"This won't do, Johnny," said the old lawyer, with an attempt at sternness. "You're simply making yourself ill. Try to understand that you can't force a matter of this kind. Slow and steady wins the race, you know. As for what you tell me about Frame, that was only to be expected. The man is simply taking advantage of his business connections to queer your pitch. It was a mistake to tell him

what you intended doing. Your action was quixotic and quite unnecessary. I've half a mind to advise you to drop the whole thing while you can. I don't know that anyone would blame you for so doing."

Heritage made a gesture of impatience.

"I tell you, Bob, I can't let go now. I've passed my word to find that money and I'm going to have it. I don't care a damn for Frame or any of them. I'll get that money—every penny of it, if I have to steal it and go to gaol afterwards."

Colvin nodded soothingly.

"I know how you feel, Johnny; but please don't glare at me like that. The Lord knows I'm not responsible for your troubles. I'm here to help you if I can. This is a case for some cool thinking. Don't let Frame get you rattled."

The young man smiled penitently.

"I'm an ungrateful beast. The thing is so damnably hard to understand though. I get frantic at times. I can't get a soul to touch the proposition."

"Well," began Colvin; but got no further. The telephone. at his elbow rang smartly and he held the receiver to his ear. After a second he beckoned to Heritage.

"It's you they want."

He sat back in his chair, his face wrinkled in thought, He heard Heritage speaking quickly into the instrument but paid no attention to the words. He was recalled to himself by an excited thump on the back. Heritage was looking down at him with eyes that shone queerly.

"Bob, d'you know who that was? It was James. You remember James? I told you about him some time ago. He was one of the first men I saw. It appears now that he's been thinking over what I told him. He's to help us after all. He can't handle the matter straight out, but he thinks he might be able to interest the Vilmy Timber Corporation. He's their agent, you know. He wants to see me right away."

"Here, hold on a minute," said Colvin, as Heritage took up his hat and made for the door. "Who are the Vilmy Timber Corporation people? I never heard of them."

"Nor I," called the young man, over his shoulder. "It's my belief though that they are angels in disguise. See you later."

"Be careful what you do," shouted Colvin after him but there was no reply.

He sat a moment in deep thought. Then he rang for his clerk.

"Ever hear of the Vilmy Timber Corporation, Seton?"

"Only that a firm of that name was registered a couple of months ago, Mr. Colvin. Shall I find out?"

His principal hesitated.

"Yes, you might as well. Wait a second . . . on second thoughts I'll do it myself. In the meantime get me the Tasmanian Government Regulations under the Crown Lands Act of 1912. Also hunt me up a map of the island. I'll be back in half an hour."

A little later Colvin entered the office of a share-broking friend and plumped himself into a chair with the ease of old acquaintance.

"Ramsay, what do you know of the Vilmy Timber Corporation, Ltd.? They appear to be newly registered. Am I interrupting?"

"Not at all," said the sharebroker sarcastically. "You choose about the busiest hour of the busiest day we've had for weeks, and then calmly ask if you're interrupting. You're not an interruption; you're nothing short of a calamity. What's the matter with you? Oh, the Vilmy Corporation? Yes, I know a little about them. If I tell you, will you clear out?"

"It's a bargain," agreed Colvin unsmilingly. "Cut loose, like a good chap."

"Vilmy Timber Corporation, Pty. Ltd. Estimated capital £100,000. Subscribed capital £50,000," recited the sharebroker tersely. "They registered three months ago and their office is in Collins Street. From the trade name you'd be apt to think they handled nothing but timber. As a matter of fact, they touch it indirectly only. They are Finance Loan pure and simple. They won't speculate, though they don't object to backing a cut-and-dried certainty, supposing such a thing to exist. So far as I can make out their object is to help the small saw-miller and timber-getter. They get him going on his own security, handle his stuff for him on commission, and sometimes even advance on account of his cut. On the whole they appear to be a fairly decent crowd."

"I see. Any connection with the big timber firms?"

Ramsay shook his head.

"Why, it's a funny thing, but the Vilmy crowd appear to be right up against the big saw-millers. As a matter of

fact, they make a point of advertising their opposition to the ring. A pretty safe lot, I should imagine. They want you to handle their business ? "

" Not that I know of." Colvin rose to his feet. " Thanks, Jimmy. I'll do as much for you, maybe, one of these days. By the way, who's running the Vilmy Co. ? "

" Don't know," said the sharebroker, already back at his work. " A man named James is Melbourne agent. Try him. Sorry, old chap, but I've got to keep the wheels going round. See you later."

Colvin stumped back to his office conscious of a distinct feeling of relief. He accepted Ramsay's information without reserve. The Vilmy people seemed exactly capable of supplying the sort of backing that Heritage required. Once they took up the proposition the worst difficulty should be past.

Colvin busied himself immediately with the little pile of papers Seton had placed on his desk. He was still immersed in calculation when Heritage returned. The younger man was jubilant.

" Bob, the tide's turning at last. We might have known that Frame couldn't buy up the whole of Melbourne. These people are actually against him. James as good as told me so. He's a first-rate fellow, when you get to know him."

He sat down and beamed.

" Bob, it's as good as done. I wonder how Frame will take it."

Colvin smiled.

" Lord, Johnny, you're like a barometer. Go ahead and tell me what happened."

" Well, it seems James hadn't quite understood me the first time. He thought I wanted to put in a mill plant right off the reel. Of course, anything of that sort is very much in the future. We can't afford to tackle anything but staves, palings, and logs. I told him so again. In the end James mapped out a definite agreement which he says his folk will stand by. It seems a fair enough proposition."

" Terms ? " asked Colvin concisely.

" They agree to advance what money we want up to £5,000, as a first loan, and further sums as may be required as our lease opens up. Our lease contract is to be lodged with them. We guarantee to carry out the full terms of the lease, to pay the Vilmy Corporation or their agents £8 per cent. on all borrowed moneys, and to market our stuff

through them ; paying them commission of 2½ per cent. on all sales. If we fail to pay rent and interest on a due date, the Vilmy Company will pay themselves and charge it against us as a further loan. That seems reasonable."

" It's the usual practice, I believe," agreed Colvin. " How do you stand for a chance to clear yourself, if things go well ? "

" I saw to that," said Heritage. " Any time after the agreement has been in force for twelve months, we have the right to pay back all borrowed moneys. On the other hand, we are liable to forfeit. Equally, at the expiration of twelve months, the Vilmy people have a right to call up principal and interest on three months' notice in writing. Should we be unable to meet the call they can enter and take possession of the lease, plant, and other assets we may hold."

His partner nodded thoughtfully.

" The ordinary business precaution. No other forfeiture clause, I suppose ? "

Heritage hesitated slightly.

" Well, yes. But the possibility is so remote as to be almost negligible. James explained that his principals did not want permanent investment in any one concern. Once they got a firm going they became anxious to withdraw their capital and use it over again in the same way. They looked to make their fair profit by marketing for all hands. The quicker their turn-over, the wider became their connection. For this reason they insist that any contract we may enter into to supply timber must be rigidly fulfilled. There must be no application for extension of time. Failing our ability to deliver punctually, they reserve the right to step in and take over control. As I said before, however, nothing of the kind can be feared ? The Vilmy people do not want to be bothered with an active interest in any one concern."

Colvin shrugged his shoulders.

" I don't altogether like it, but beggars can't be choosers. I suppose you can't do better than go ahead with the business. Are you placing any contracts before you go back ? "

" I'm going the round of the coopers next week. We'll tackle nothing but staves to start with."

" Well, be careful ! " advised Colvin.

" Watch me ! " smiled the young man reassuringly. " One good safe contract, and I'll be well satisfied. James thinks he can put me on to someone right away. Now I'm going away to be busy. You'll see the dust fly presently."

The words were in the nature of a prophecy. For the next couple of weeks Heritage worked like a horse, scarcely finding time to eat and sleep. The results of his activity, however, more than satisfied him. Not only did he complete arrangements with the Vilmy Company, but he also managed to secure a contract with a leading brewery to supply a quarter of a million staves by the following autumn. Elated, he wired the news of his success to Charley Salter, and proceeded under the guidance of the genial James to select what tools they required, a list of these having been given him previously by the stout cattle dealer. On the whole, Heritage was well pleased with the way things were going.

So completely had his work occupied him that for some days he scarcely gave a thought to Frame. His arrangements completed, however, Heritage found time to wonder a little at the seeming inactivity of his big opponent. True, Frame had nearly succeeded in crippling him at the outset. He had all but closed the money market against him. That he had not done so was due solely to the unreckoned existence of philanthropy in the shape of the Vilmy Timber Corporation, a venture seemingly without business parallel. The young man could hardly restrain a chuckle at thought of Frame's discomfiture.

Of Winifred Frame, Heritage had seen nothing. In a way, he was thankful for this. He shrank, not unnaturally, from a necessity to justify himself anew. He guessed instinctively that the girl would unhesitatingly accept her father's view-point and condemn him utterly. The thought troubled him not at all. He was surprised to discover with what complete absence of sentiment he was able to remember Win. Yet only a few weeks back he had fancied himself to be in love with her.

It remained for Colvin to test him finally on this point. The lawyer had dropped in at Heritage's hotel on the morning of the young man's second departure for Timber Bend. There was a hint of worry in his greeting.

"Well, Johnny, the tug-of-war is to come. We ought to win out. In fact, there shouldn't be a doubt of it. I've gone into this thing with you over and over again. So far as human judgment and foresight can count, the venture should be a safe one. It's the unknown quantity I'm frightened of. I tell you what it is, Jack. I've been in the one groove for so many years that I haven't the nerve for a straight-out fight of this sort. I doubt if you have either.

If it wasn't for those agricolean friends of yours I should be in a state of almost hopeless pessimism."

Heritage grinned.

"Diddums get frightened then, Bob? Frame is a great bluffer. He's even got you rattled. Yes, he's a great bluffer."

But Colvin refused to respond.

"Don't be too sure of it!"

He looked searchingly at his friend.

"By the way, I met Winifred Frame yesterday. Want to hear the news?"

"Shoot, Colonel!" invited Heritage promptly.

"She told me she had just become engaged to be married. The name of the fortunate gentleman did not transpire."

So far from loosing countenance Heritage was conscious of a feeling of almost relief. He shocked his partner by bursting into a hearty laugh.

"I congratulate him, whoever he is. Don't look so disappointed, Bob. Did you expect me to faint with despair? Was any reference made to my worthy self?"

"She entrusted me with a message which I hesitate to deliver. It consists of five words only. Sure you're proof?"

"Try me," said Heritage, flushing slightly.

"'Tell Jack he's a fool,'" quoted Colvin gravely. "Unladylike, perhaps; but infinitely to the point. There was an air of finality about the utterance which led me to suppose she knew just exactly what she was talking about. I presume the allusion was to your defiance of her father. Or did it refer to your loss of herself, do you think?"

Heritage rose laughing to gather his traps.

"I don't know or care! Yes, I mean just that, Bob. I'm as well cured as any ham. So far as I'm concerned I don't suppose I shall meet the Frames again, unless by accident."

"Maybe you won't," muttered Colvin to himself, as he went out into the street. "No, I suppose you won't."

But his thought somehow lacked conviction.

CHAPTER XIII

CHARLEY SALTER drove to Green Valley to meet Heritage. The stout man went off in a simmer of excitement. His own arrangements complete, he waited now only the return of Heritage to commence operations in earnest. He was burning with impatience to hear the details of the young man's success ; anxious also to impart, in turn, news of his own and Pete Diamond's doings in the interim.

On the afternoon of the same day Pete finally shifted camp from the coast. With the coming of spring the big cattleman had discarded his cumbersome bluey and thick leather leggings. Clad only in his shirt sleeves, as the phrase has it, the magnificent proportions of the man were more than ever discernible. He rode like a Centaur ; the embodiment of ease and sure-footed determination. Jean Salter, watching from her verandah while he rode into the yards, felt her heart warm with pride. She ran to meet him. Pete caught her in a bear's embrace.

" Jeannie . . . Jeannie, what a witch you are ! I ain't been happy since I been away. Well, it's all settled at last. I've cleaned up on the run, and they're sending a new man along early next week."

He held the girl away from him, looking into her flushed face adoringly.

" Ready for the scrap, little woman ? Jack comes back to-night, don't he ? We'll need to be getting busy. How are you going to board the both of us ? "

" When Mr. Heritage is away from camp he will go to Adaires," said Jean. She saw Pete's black eyes twinkle, and broke into an amused laugh. " Now do be good, Pete, and not tease. I know just what you're thinking ; so you may save yourself the trouble of saying it. We had to come to some arrangement. You couldn't expect mother to cook enough for three great useless men. Peggy must take her share."

"Match-maker," accused the cattleman. "Well, then I'll be good. Jeannie, when are we going to that dream farm of ours? Ain't I tamed enough yet?"

She met his worshipping eyes with a frank tenderness in her own blue ones.

"Don't be impatient, Boy. Just a little longer. The time will surely come." She broke off; to repeat almost passionately "It must come. Oh, Pete, life is such a beautiful thing."

"Sure. But you ain't to think any other way, you know," Pete reminded her gently. "You got an idea they's something going to hurt us. It ain't so. I keep telling you it ain't so. It's jess a wrong notion that's took you. Why, Jeannie, you know they's nothing could keep me from you if you was to call. I'd hear you from the other end of the earth. This timber concern is worrying you, that's what it is. But don't you fret. We're going to win out."

But a change had come over the girl. She seemed more thoughtful, even timorous. "I hope so. It wouldn't do to believe otherwise. Pete, I wanted to ask you about Sadie Williams. We seldom see her now. I sometimes think she avoids us purposely. And she looks so ill, poor girl. It worries me. Have you any idea what is wrong?"

"Not the least in the world," said the cattleman. "Sadie ain't been herself this long time. Maybe that big brute Login has been teasing her. He's all mean, that man. I never could make out why Sadie bothered with him. Wimmen is queer creatures. They seem to love without rhyme or reason. I've no kick against that. Where'd I be, if it weren't so. I kind of wish we could do something for Sadie. That old father of hers ain't much good. Yet I doubt she could bring herself to leave him."

"She would not," declared Jean positively. "Sadie has a very strong sense of her duty. Poor child! If only her mother had lived how different it might have been. I hope she remembers that we are her friends."

While tea was being set Pete busied himself at the stables. Afterwards, he sat with Jean on the verandah waiting the return of Salter and Heritage. At the soft murmur of their voices Mrs. Salter, knitting by the open window of the kitchen, smiled a little wistfully. At times her own buoyant, rose-tinted youth came very near to her. Fortune had passed her by, but she still had her man. Her staunch old heart refused resolutely to acknowledge defeat.

In the spell of the dusk the plains lay grey and brown, a dim, silent vista dreaming in the afterglow of the fallen sun. From beyond the rim of the horizon came the languorous whisper of the tide washing the bar on the mouth of the Bat River. The air was odorous of summer.

Jean Salter, drinking in the beauty of the twilight, presently touched her companion's arm. Pete looked round with a quick smile.

" Well, old girl, what is it ? "

She gave a little sigh of contentment.

" I was just thinking how beautiful it is—how I love it. Oh, Pete, I never want to leave the outback. I just couldn't be happy herded with others in the city, like an animal penned for slaughter. Boy, promise me . . . you'll never want to take me away from the coast ? I want to live here always. I want to rest here when I die.

The big fellow patted her hand soothingly.

" Why, Jeannie, you know it'll always be jess as you say. We ain't thinking about dying though. We're going to live. I reckon I think as you do. The plains is good enough for me. Wait till we get that dream farm of ours."

" Somehow thought of the future frightens me," resumed the girl, after a little silence. " I'm frightened of Frame and Garraway, and what they may try to do. Have you noticed the wild, rough class of men that Garraway gathers about him ? Those men call themselves bush hands. In a sense, so they are ; but only in a sense. They don't really belong here at all. They don't fit in. They're outsiders. There seems to be something wrong about every one of them."

Pete laughed contemptuously.

" Them ? Don't you worry about them, Jeannie. They ain't worth a thought of your worry. Garraway picks his men purposely for the hard cases that they are. And what are they ? They're crooks, hide-outs, lay-off men—every man jack of them. They're men that ain't game to walk the cities. They come here where they ain't known and lay low. I know their sort, but they don't scare me. They's no way that they can come at us to really hurt us. Even if they was, we can give them as good as we get. I'm as hard case as any of them, if it comes to that."

Jean looked at him quickly.

" Pete . . . don't. I can't bear to hear that savage note in your voice. What you say about Garraway's men

may be true. But don't you see it is the thought of your retaliation that troubles me most. You mustn't ever give cause again. You'll want to hit back, and I can't blame you. But it wouldn't do. Boy, d'you hear me? It wouldn't do. You've too much to lose. Besides, we can win fairly. And even if we didn't win, even if we were beaten badly, it wouldn't hurt so much so that we could remember our hands were clean."

Pete kept silence for a full minute. When he spoke his voice was strangely gentle.

"Jeannie, I doubt we'll be wise to play Garraway fair. Them sort wouldn't understand. All the same, I'll do my best. I'll go along real peaceable, so long as I'm let. Only remember, a man ain't always keeping his head. They's a limit with us all."

There was an undercurrent of dejection in the big fellow's tones. None knew better than he that his continued loyalty to the restraining influence of the girl at his side had weakened him immensely in the opinions of the wilder spirits on the coast. These men, dull of perception as they were keen of malicious purpose, placed an entirely wrong construction on his forbearance. They grew daily more bold. By sullen looks and growing insolence of speech and manner they sought to whip him finally from his pride of place. Pete smiled grimly at thought of the immensity of their mistake.

With Jean the mood had passed. The night was calling her to admiration of the far-reaching horizon, studded with sapphire stars that waned to silvery nothingness even as she watched them. A soft patter of feet made her look down. She gave an exclamation of pleasure.

"Pup! Is it you, doggie? How did you get loose? And where have you been to, eh?"

The animal looked up at her with luminous eyes. He whined softly and raised his fore-paws to her knee. The girl bent her head and fondled the smooth head lovingly. She smiled as Pete's voice broke out discontentedly.

"Now ain't that nice for me? If they's any hugging to be done, why, I'm right here, ain't I? Pup, he's a good dog, but he ain't able to appreciate. Now me? I'm . . ."

"There they are at last," broke in Jean. She looked at Pete mischievously. "Here endeth the lover's lament. Now do be good, or they will see you."

She dodged deftly beneath his eager hand and ran laughing to meet the arrivals. When Pete caught up she was already swinging open the yard gates. Charley Salter chuckled a welcome as he drove in.

"Well, I've got him all right; ain't I, Jack? We're the original pair of aces, him and me. With a little help we can lick creation on its own dust-heap."

The smug satisfaction of the stout man called forth a remonstrance from Pete.

"You do hate yourself, don't you. Anyone would think that you two were going to do it all. Wait till Garraway gets going and see if you ain't hollering out for little Jean and Peter."

Later, as he lay thankfully in his bed, Heritage was able to review their preparations in the light of what Salter had told him. The stout man had been energy itself. Immediately upon putting in his application for leasehold, he had begun his preparations for a summer camp on his original finding. Tents were pitched within a wide circle of open ground close to the river bank. Already men were engaged in track cutting, and the dozen and one minor steps preparatory to commencing work in earnest. Most satisfactory of all Salter had succeeded in securing them an outlet to the Government tramline. In relating this piece of good news the stout man had beamed with satisfied pride.

"It was the one thing that troubled me," he confessed to Heritage, as they drove along. "Most everything else was fixed. We had our application in for the lease; we'd selected site for camp; and Pete had rounded up some of the handiest bush-whackers on the coast. But we hadn't no outlet. I tell you it worried me badly. And then I thought of Jerry Jones and lit right over to see him. In the end I managed to strike a bargain. We lease right-of-way down the edge of Jerry's east side-line. I've got the thing in black and white. Frame can bawl all he wants but he can't alter that. Yes, I reckon we're beginning well."

Heritage was better able to appreciate the stout man's boast when he visited their camp early next morning. Everywhere around was evidence of activity. Among the many surprises awaiting the young man was the discovery of George Judney and his mate Sollum presiding over the cooking arrangements.

"Well, upon my word, what part in this joke are you two

taking ? " he inquired of the grinning Sollum. " They never told me a word about your being here. I'm jolly glad to see you."

Judney uttered no greeting, but his hand-grip made Heritage wince. The lank hut-keeper's melancholy, bearded face was wrinkled approvingly.

Sollum ventured on an explanation.

" Why, you see Charley Salter was wanting someone to do the odd jobs around camp, so me and George took it on. We kind of thought we'd like to help spoke Garraway's wheel, anyway."

" Good enough," said Heritage enthusiastically. " Well, George, how's your red-headed Venus, eh ? What's her name ? Sadie, isn't it ? Been making you any tea lately ? "

Judney shook his head.

" I ain't seen her for quite a time. And I ain't had a drink of real tea either."

He regarded his grinning partner with sour disfavour.

" When you done hee-hawing, you can let us know. For a cook you're no seventh child of a seventh child, anyhow."

A sudden thought had occurred to Heritage. He looked at Sollum curiously.

" Joe, what's your second name ? "

The little man looked at him blankly.

" Meaning ? " he asked.

" Your surname ? You're Joe what ? "

Sollum scratched his head in perplexity.

" Why, hang me, if I don't disremember ! Most always, you see, I'm called jess Joe, or maybe Sollum. They's letters inside somewhere, if I could find them."

" Would you know it when you heard it ? " asked Heritage, sceptically. He was thinking to himself, " Of course, it's too absurd ; but I can't afford to miss a chance." The idea of Sollum turning out to be the man he wanted was too fanciful to take seriusly.

" I might, but I dunno. Yes, I b'lieve I should. I'll turn up them letters anyhow."

" It wouldn't be Barkley, for instance ? " suggested Heritage, almost apologetically.

" Ain't that the man you was looking for ? " Sollum's grin suddenly faded. He looked almost startled. " It wouldn't be Barkley, says you. Why, dang me, if I don't b'lieve it is something like that ! That's funny now, ain't it ? Jess you wait a second."

Heritage and George Judney eyed one another in silence while the little man rummaged the contents of a small hand-bag which he produced from beneath his bunk. Presently he held out an envelope. On his face was a relieved grin.

Heritage snatched at the paper eagerly.

" ' Mr. Joseph Fox ' " he read out.

George Judney broke into a rumble of scornful laughter.

" Fox ? Well, if that ain't jess like Sollum. ' Barkley, is it ? ' says Joe. ' Why, I b'lieve that's me,' says he. *And* his name is Fox."

The little man waited patiently for his friend's mirth to subside. He appeared in no wise disconcerted.

" Well, I knew they was a bark in it somewhere," he said cheerfully. The atrocious joke helped to cover Heritage's quite unreasonable feeling of disappointment. He departed laughing.

Early in the next week Heritage took his first lesson in timber felling under the amused guidance of Steve Strangways, one of Pete's helpers from down south. The work was bitterly hard and often distinctly dangerous. Nevertheless he stuck to it doggedly enough. He never forgot that first week. His hands blistered and cracked, his back and shoulders ached consumedly. He would have given worlds to drop out, but his pride would not allow him. He kept dizzily on, his hands and feet obeying mechanically the insistence of his will. At nightfall he crawled into camp long after the others. Almost too tired to eat, he lay with relaxed limbs, his body oppressed with a weariness he had not thought it possible to endure. When food was offered him he took it dazedly, falling asleep almost before he had finished masticating. The nights were a torment.

Gradually, however, he was aware of a change. As one day followed another there crept into his veins something of the sap and vigour of the great timber in which he worked. His eyes brightened ; his limbs no longer ached so unbearably, the feeling of lassitude left him. To his amazement he found himself beginning to love the work, to look forward eagerly to what the morrow might bring of task and problem. His chest deepened. He began to breathe as if he liked it—long, delicious breaths of the wine-like air that filled the bush. With the strengthening of his body came also a tremendous development of spirit. The stubborn vigour of the mighty forest no longer oppressed him. It challenged his imagination as nothing else could have done. To match his own

strength against it seemed the one purpose of his existence. Unconsciously he ripened to the heritage of his manhood.

There were times, however, when his new-born confidence received rude check. The bush was like a huge giant slumberingly tolerant of the Lilliputian efforts of man to enslave it. On occasions it would become galvanised into a thing of horror. Of a sudden would come a south-westerly gale that lashed the forest to a frenzy of action. Huge trees uprooted, crashing to earth with a roar that stilled even the tumultuous shoutings of the wind demons; the bush echoed with the artillery of snapping stems and the reverberating clap of the storm as it flung itself against a wall of wildly swaying timber; the air was full of flying branches torn ruthlessly from the parent stem and borne shrieking on the fore-front of the ravaging enemy.

At such times men shrank appalled to the comparative safety of the camps; work became at a standstill until the fury of the gale lessened. Yet be they cautious as they might, the bush would take its toll of life and limb. Heritage sickened at more than one ghastly evidence of the unconquerable animosity of the great bushland. He saw men gashed dreadfully by the skidding of an axe, or the careless fixing of a tool. He saw them carried past him maimed and bleeding as the result of a mistaken judgment, or momentary forgetfulness. Tree trunks side-jumped, or ran-up unexpectedly; heads lodged; giant blackwoods trembling to the last blow of the axe or drive of the wedge, turned on the stump and came back. Once Heritage's axe mate was struck on the temple by a flying twig catapulted from the swaying head of a scroughed myrtle. The man dropped on his face among the ferns and rubbish with no more than a kind of surprised grunt. Heritage bathed his face with cold tea from a billy, and the man recovered sufficiently to stumble into camp and collapse on his bunk. Later he became unconscious again. Heritage and three others rigged a stretcher of corn sacks threaded on gum poles, and started to carry the injured man to meet the doctor hastily telephoned for from Green Valley, fifteen miles away. Heritage never forgot that journey. Their burden was a giant bushman, over six feet in height, and broad in proportion. His skull had been fractured, and at intervals he shook in convulsions. When that happened the stretcher bearers were forced to halt; standing, often as not, knee deep in swamp. The strain, physically

and mentally, was terrific. And, as it proved, quite unavailing. The man died even as they sighted the doctor's jinker in the distance.

Despite his inexperience Heritage went unscathed. The proverbial luck of the new chum held to him faithfully. With the approach of summer, gales became less frequent. To that extent, at least, the dangers of their work were reduced. The days lengthened perceptibly. The air grew softer. The bush took on a lighter hue. On the open plain there sprang suddenly a carpet of tiny flowers and silken moss. The jutting knolls along the coast became gorgeous with the green and scarlet of the pig-face. Birds twittered in the bushes. Almost before they realised it the long cold days of winter were gone, and the spirit of summer descended on the coastlands in a flood of golden, sun-kissed days.

Charley Salter had long since dropped his characteristic attitude of easy-going unconcern. He knew himself to be facing the fight of his life-time, the one chance of his genial existence to make good to some purpose. From the very beginning he made his friends and partners confidants of his plans. Wisely he had decided to restrict their initial operations to felling and splitting only. To attempt haulage or cartage during the wet season was to court failure. Only with the approach of summer would the ground stand the traffic in view. Even then would be discovered various pot-holes along the way which must needs be bottomed laboriously with saplings and brush before the heavy drays could pass over safely. The stout leader became increasingly serious as one problem after another was faced and solved. His loquacity gave place to a grim-lipped silence. He worked untiringly.

One thing alone bothered Salter. This was the apparent indifference of Slum Garraway to their manifest progress. The fact worried the stout man not a little. Wily old fox that he was, he sought continually for a reason, casting here and there in his mind in an effort to reconcile the irreconcilable. In the end he decided to let time elucidate the nature of the opposition which common-sense warned him was in course of preparation. The blow fell without warning of any kind.

Steve Strangways returned to camp early one afternoon. Heritage was busily figuring at the packing case that served for a desk. Salter sat nursing a raw heel, his little twinkling

eyes misty with thought. With the exception of George Judney the rest of the men were at work in the bush.

The new-comer wasted no time in preliminaries.

"I thought you told us it was all right to open a track down Jones' side-line, Charley."

"Why, so I did!" the stout man assured him.

Strangways grinned apologetically.

"Some of Garraway's men are holding up the boundary," he explained. "They won't let us enter. They got a trespass notice posted."

"The hell they have!" exploded Salter. His small eyes spun angrily. "Look here, Steve, you ought to know bluff when you meet it. I tell you we're renting that ground from Jones. I got the whole thing down in black and white. You get right back and throw Slum's crowd into the river. That strip of land belongs to us."

The man looked at his boss curiously.

"That's what I told them, but they only laughed. They claim to have you by the short hair. All I could get out of them was for you to get across and see Slum for yourself. So of course I come along and told you."

Salter continued to pull at his ragged moustache in wrathful silence. Heritage, scenting trouble, looked up anxiously.

"Sure your agreement with Jerry Jones was quite all right?" he asked.

"Right as rain!" declared the stout man. He thought a moment. "No, I can't see where they've got us. That strip of land is rented us for as long as we like. I reckon we'd best hear what it is that Slum wants to tell us. How about you seeing him, Jack? I'd go myself, only my heel ain't well. George can go along with you. They's times it does no harm to have company. I wish Pete were here. Well, what say?"

"I suppose it's the only thing to do," agreed the young man. "The quicker we learn what the trouble is, the better."

"Well, don't lose your block, whatever you do," advised Salter. "Keep your mouth shut mostly, but your eyes and ears wide open. I don't aim to get into holts with them yet awhile. Jess find out what you can and then come back."

With George Judney at his elbow, Heritage made his way down the line to Frame's camp. They found Garraway at work in his office. The big manager returned their greeting coolly.

" Well, what can I do for you ? "

Unasked Heritage selected a chair and sat down, his face towards the open window. A number of men were grouped around a log stack by the mill head. Amongst them he thought he recognised the slinking figure of Gus Rebner. Of Login there was no sign.

Garraway was looking at him impatiently.

" You want to see me ? " he asked abruptly.

" I do, Mr. Garraway. The fact is, there appears to be some misunderstanding with some of your men. Some time back we leased a strip of ground along Jerry Jones' property. Your men now refuse to allow us to enter. Of course, we recognise their action is without your approval ; probably without your knowledge. Under the circumstances, I thought it better to ask you personally to order them to vacate. We don't want trouble with anyone, if it can be avoided."

The manager smiled unpleasantly.

" You're rushing things a bit, aren't you ? You take too much for granted. Any misunderstanding there is must be on your side. Did I understand you to say you had rented that strip of ground ? You claim right-of-way there ? Since when ? "

Heritage was frankly puzzled.

" Why, for weeks. Of course we claim right-of-way. I can't see your need to quibble. We pay monthly rental for that land."

" You don't tell me that ! " Garraway looked at him with an insolent assumption of surprise. " That's too bad, that is. Jones never said a word about it to us. Otherwise I'm certain we never should have bought."

" Bought ? "

" Why, you knew that surely. We made no secret of the matter. We needed that bit of ground for a haulage track. Jones sold right out to Frame a week ago. He's gone to live on the mainland, they tell me."

With the realisationof how they had been tricked, Heritage became angry. He broke into swift expostulation.

" The thing's grossly dishonest. You knew our arrangements with Jones perfectly. As for you needing that land for a haulage track, the idea is absurd. A haulage track where to ? Where from ? So far as you're concerned it's a blind alley. It leads to nowhere except to ground occupied by us."

Heritage glanced at George Judney, but the lank hut-keeper was gazing stolidly out of the window. The little group of men by the log stack had broken up. By ones and twos they were approaching the office. The young man got to his feet and faced Garraway. His eyes were snapping.

" Mr. Garraway, from the very beginning I was warned that you couldn't fight fairly. I refused to believe it. I can see I was wrong. I can see now exactly the class of men I'm dealing with. Let me tell you that you've just made one of the biggest mistakes of your life. In spite of what you've done—in spite of anything you can do, we're going to beat you. And when we've beaten you, we'll make you pay for every dirty trick you've played. Why . . . you're nothing better than a lot of worn-out crooks. We'll beat you till you wonder how it happened."

Even as he spoke he realised to the full the absurdity of the threat he uttered, the impossibility of realisation. Without an outlet they were helpless. Stark ruin faced them all. The injustice of what had happened made him choke. He felt actually sick.

Garraway too had risen. His prominent eyes were fixed on his approaching men, and he burst into sudden anger.

" That'll do from you. You set yourself up to compete with your betters, and now you'll take what's coming to you. Did you think a man like Sam Frame was going to dance to a tune of your piping ? Why, when the old man's through with you there won't be enough backbone among the lot of you to stiffen a pan of dough. Get out of my office and take your snivelling home to that fat fraud, Salter."

Heritage was about to reply when he felt Judney's hand touch his arm meaningly. The gaunt hut-keeper's sunken eyes held a curious glitter. He muttered softly, " Get outside and in the open. Hurry ! they's some game doing. I reckon they was jess waiting for some of us to come along. Get a hold on your temper."

Garraway followed them to the door of the building. At sight of his grinning face Heritage forgot the hut-keeper's admonition. With angry relish he repeated his former jibe."

" You're nothing better than a lot of cheap crooks. You're what Salter calls you—timber wolves."

Gus Rebner, coming up in time to hear the words, threw a swift look towards Garraway. The manager nodded

imperceptibly. In his eyes was a kind of malicious expectation.

Rebner threw down the tool he was carrying. In a single stride he planted himself in front of Heritage.

"Was you including me in that lot?"

The man's tigerish glare, no less than the burning insolence of his tone, made his intentions plain. He was setting himself deliberately to force a quarrel under conditions favourable to himself. The recognition of Rebner's antagonism steadied Heritage immediately. He became at once cool and alert. Confident in a belief in his own ability to take care of himself, he made no attempt to dodge the issue.

"You can please yourself!" he retorted swiftly.

Out of the tail of his eye he saw George Judney edging to one side. He wondered quickly if the hut-keeper were seeking to keep himself from the trouble impending. The thought no sooner entered his mind than he was heartily ashamed of it. Whatever else Judney was he was certainly no craven.

"What's that you say?" asked Rebner. Heritage's readiness to take up the challenge evidently surprised him. The voices of the watching men hushed expectantly.

"I said you can please yourself," repeated Heritage evenly. "I reckon there is no difference to choose between any of you. From your boss down, you're a set of sharping blackguards."

Rebner's response was characteristic of the man. His teeth bared suddenly in a grin of fury. Without an instant's warning his heavily-shod right foot shot out in a kick at Heritage's knee-cap. He missed by only a fraction. Before he could recover his balance Heritage hit him twice in lightening succession, ducking beautifully to avoid the wild swing that followed. Grunting, Rebner came back at him. His right fist, swinging from his side in a tremendous upper-cut, caught Heritage unprepared and sent him reeling. More by instinct than anything else he managed to evade the shower of blows with which Rebner followed up his momentary success. Heritage could only counter weakly in reply. Above the drumming in his ears sounded the shrill cry of George Judney.

"Break, Jack! Break, you fool!"

By a tremendous effort Heritage fought himself clear of the corner to which he was being gradually driven. Over-

confidence had all but brought about his undoing. At in-fighting Rebner was proving more than his master. At all costs he must avoid his opponent's wild-cat dexterity in this respect. Heritage backed away cautiously, his guard held low down. Miraculously his head had cleared. He faced Rebner with a grin.

A second time the section boss rushed him. Heritage side-stepped and the blow missed him by inches. Swinging short round he smashed a counter to Rebner's ear. Before he could get away, however, he received in return a slam over the heart that made him gasp. He began to wonder just how much more he could stand.

Suddenly Rebner tried to trip him. The trick nearly succeeded. Moved to fresh anger at the foul, Heritage loosed a succession of stinging drives. His opponent grunted and came back for more. He got it. Heritage's fist met him squarely on the side of the neck and Rebner went head-long to his knees. The watching men roared.

Rebner's face was shredded. One of his eyes was closed. He came at Heritage with a bellow of fury. By now the blood of both men was fairly up. They met toe to toe, hitting furiously. Another smashing blow over the heart brought Heritage to remembrance of his former mistake, and he broke away almost suffocating. Rebner was beginning to weaken. He caught his breath in gulps. His remaining eye followed Heritage in a stare of hate. He commenced a torrent of abuse.

Suddenly, without warning of any kind, Rebner sprang aside and caught up a slash-hook from a heap of tools beside a stump. His arms went up over his head ; he seemed to fairly lift his body into the air as he made ready for the blow. With Judney's frightened scream of warning beating at his ears Heritage launched himself forward in a single leap. Once, twice he struck at the unguarded bull throat of his enemy. So swift was the action that Rebner was taken by surprise. He was unable to get a balance for his weapon. At the first smack of Heritage's fist on his jugular,. the slash-hook dropped from his half-paralysed hands. He lurched in drunkenly. Heritage's second blow, swung with all the force of desperation, landed squarely on the angle of his jaw. With hardly a sound Rebner crumpled in a heap on the ground.

What followed was in the nature of a nightmare. On a sudden Heritage found himself the centre of a shouting,

swearing throng. Blows were aimed at him. He heard Garraway shouting excitedly. Then all at once he was aware of George Judney at his elbow. The lank hut-keeper was working his long arms like flails. Before his terrific blows men cringed and broke back. He called pantingly to Heritage :

" Get round and guard my back. Be ready to duck when I shout. Quick ! . . . before Slum mixes in."

Half dazed Heritage complied as best he could. He warded off a couple of blows aimed viciously at the hut-keeper's bobbing head. Then a muscular arm went round his neck in a strangle hold and he was jerked rudely off his feet. He opened his mouth to yell, but his cramped lungs would not respond. Luckily at that moment Judney turned and saw what was happening. He came back with a rush. Heritage's unseen assailant released his hold a second too late. Before he could get his hands up Judney drove a bony elbow into his face and the man fell out with a yelp of pain. An instant later the two friends were clear, and racing unashamedly down the tramline. Strangely enough no attempt at pursuit was made.

Once around the bend Judney dropped into a walk. Presently he halted outright, turning to Heritage with something like a gleam of admiration in his deep-set eyes.

" Well, that certainly was one hell of a mix-up. I kind of judge we ain't over popular back yonder. You'd almost have thought they didn't like us." He emitted a curious little barking laugh. " Lord if you could only see yourself. You look like a grain of puffed wheat. Won't Charley Salter feel bucked up to hear of things."

" That's open to suspicion," said the young man, rather shortly. Judney's complacent acceptance of the situation almost annoyed him. In addition, he was feeling far from pleased at his own inability to steer clear of vulgar brawling. So far from doing any good it was probable that actual harm might result from his action in punishing Rebner. Less than ever now would Garraway be disposed to meet them fairly.

Judney, however, refused to despond. Except for the melancholy, natural to his voice, his attitude revealed almost satisfaction.

" Shake " he said, holding out his hand. " The way you dealt it out to Gus Rebner was a treat. I never guessed you had it in you. I'm kind of proud about it. It was jess the

kind of boiling scrap I used to see old Bill Hardie put up. I'm sort of sorry Bill wasn't along to see you do it."

"Who was Bill Hardie?" inquired Heritage. It was a question he had often felt prompted to ask. Both Judney and Sollum appeared to make overmuch of the individual in question. The exact identity of the lauded one, however, seemed strangely elusive. He was, and he was not. Heritage was often puzzled to account for the not very definite intrusion into the conversation of the two friends, of Bill Hardie—prodigy.

At the directness of the question Judney seemed momentarily taken aback. He looked at Heritage with a shade of uneasiness.

"Why . . . I reckon he was . . . jess Bill Hardie. He was a friend of Sollum's. Yes, I reckon he was a friend of Sollum's." He changed the subject rather hastily. "My, the boys will be tickled to hear what's been doing. The way you done up Frame's mob was something to write home about."

"Only for you they'd have done me up," disclaimed Heritage. He essayed a smile with swollen lips. The hut-keeper flung up a horrified hand.

"For the love of Mike don't . . . don't try to smile, I mean! Come on home and get your face in a sling. It looks like it was trod on by a working bullock. My, Rebner didn't get it all!"

Charley Salter received the news of the enemy's coup in silence. Judney's none too modest description of the scrap that ensued, however, caused the stout man's little eyes to shine with pleasure.

"I always knew he could fight," he said, nodding towards Heritage, who was trying to sluice some of the dirt and blood from his battered face. "Why, the first time I ever seen him he was landing Jerry Summers one on the bean. Whoof! . . . jess like that. I can hear the sound of it yet."

"That's all very well" said the object of his gratification, ripping a torn shirt from his back. "But the fact remains that we're in a dickens of a hole, unless we can find another outlet. For the life of me I can't see what we can do."

"Nor can I" agreed Salter, relapsing into his former gloom. "Well, you get right along home to Adaire's, and let Peggy fix your battle scars. When Pete comes in I'll bring him and Jean along up there and we'll hold a pow-wow. They must be some way out."

"Maybe you wouldn't mind if me and Sollum was to come?" asked Judney unexpectedly. He scowled dejectedly at Joe and bit a corner off his plug of twist. "We're kind of interested."

"Why, certainly, George," said the stout man absently. Already his agile mind plotted a way out of the impasse. Without considering the action he rose smartly to his feet. Immediately he sat down again with a howl of pain.

"Dingbust this sore heel of mine! I keep forgetting about it. Well, get along, Jack. Pete 'll help me along when we're ready."

Despite the fact that Heritage had considerably improved his personal appearance before leaving camp, he was greeted by Peggy with an exclamation of dismay.

"It's quite all right, Miss Adaire," he assured her. He tried to smile, felt his face cracking stiffly, and gave over the attempt. George Judney's caution might not be disregarded. "We had a bit of trouble with some of Garraway's men, and this is the result. I've been sent in for repairs."

The girl, however, refused to make light of the matter. Her concern for his battered face was so evident that the young man felt suddenly abashed. As briefly as possible he related the events of the afternoon.

"What dreadful creatures those men are," said Peggy indignantly. "How fortunate you escaped when you did. And poor George too! Is he hurt?"

"Hardly a scratch on him," said Heritage. "What a loyal mate that man is. He could easily have left me to fight my battles alone, but you see he did not. Do you know I am coming to have quite an affection for those two old fellows, George and Sollum."

Peggy smiled delightedly.

"Of course you are. They take some knowing, but once you get to understand their funny little ways the rest is easy. At first I actually used to pity them. They seemed just two poor lonely old men that nobody wanted. What a mistake that was. Poor and lonely they may be in a sense, but neither one nor the other in the things that really count for happiness. They have hearts of gold. In the affection they have for each other and for those admitted to their friendship they are rich beyond the power of money, have a companionship beyond any that wealth can buy. In their own way they are thoroughly contented. They certainly quarrel abominably between themselves, but that is merely a form of affecta-

tion. They mean nothing by it. They are quite, quite happy. I wish we could all say the same."

She ended with a little sigh that caused Heritage to throw her a glance of furtive sympathy. On more than one occasion the young man had imagined her to hold some secret unhappiness in her heart. Watching her now he felt more than ever assured of it. The thought distressed him beyond measure. Lover-like he longed to help and comfort her. Eager words came to his lips but he choked them back, afraid that she would not understand. To quieten the absurd feeling of nervousness which suddenly possessed him he propounded anew the question he had asked of George Judney.

" Miss Adaire, who is Bill Hardie? I seem never to be able to escape that man's virtues. When I ask Sollum about him I am referred to George for answer. And when I humbly solicit George I am told that Sollum will oblige me. Beyond that I can't get any satisfaction at all."

Peggy broke into a soft gurgle of laughter.

" Oh, those two funny old men. Mr. Heritage, they're frauds—both of them. I'm as certain as I can be (all of us are) that Bill Hardie doesn't exist. As Pete would say, ' they ain't no such person.' Bill Hardie is a sort of masculine Mrs. Harris, an imaginary person designed to act as a kind of foil to the wretched boasting of his creators."

" That's exactly the conclusion I had reached," said Heritage, holding back a grin with difficulty. " Bill Hardie is an utterly impossible creature. I'm sure I shall one day tax George outright about his deceit. I wonder what he would say."

" Oh, don't do that " said the girl quickly. " What can it matter whether Bill Hardie is real or not. Those two old men would be very hurt if you challenged their dreaming so roughly. All of us have an ideal. Perhaps Bill Hardie is nothing more harmful than a spoken expression of the quaint ambitions cherished by George and Sollum in their young days. No, no ; you must never let them see your unbelief. Bill Hardie has become an institution, Mr. Heritage."

" I never will, Miss Adaire," said the young man quietly. Quite suddenly he felt a strange disinclination to talk. He wanted nothing more than just to sit watching the delicate profile of the girl's face as she gazed dreamily out of the window into the gathering twilight. Since he had come to live with the Adaires, Heritage more and more blessed the

impulse which had brought him to seek the companionship of these people. No longer now did he attempt to disguise from himself his love for Peggy. To win her for his wife seemed to him the most divinely desirable gift that life could bestow.

Phil Adaire he acknowledged as being something of a puzzle. For the life of him Heritage could not penetrate the reserve with which the gentle old man wrapped himself. Adaire conversed with him but seldom, yet always kindly and courteously. On rare occasions the old man unbent amazingly. At such times Heritage would be treated to something in the nature of a musical feast. Adaire was a fine pianist. He touched his instrument reverently, as one might touch a loved and valued friend ; drawing from it such exquisite interpretation of his varying mood that Heritage never failed to thrill responsively. Often Peggy would sing. Though he revelled in the beauty of her voice, Heritage was somehow always conscious of an undercurrent of depression running through the soft tones. He wondered unhappily what shadow of the past, or menace of the future, could so cloud the joyousness of her sweet life. Something warned him that not yet might he offer her the comfort and protection of his love. Yet the future could surely hold nothing but promise for them both. Believing thus Heritage was content to wait the arbitrament of time.

CHAPTER XIV

CHARLEY SALTER, seated at the head of the pine table in Adaire's sitting-room, had explained the situation as he saw it. The stout man's summing up was not encouraging, in spite of an evident desire to make the best of things. He wound up a scathing indictment of Frame and Garraway by a direct appeal to Heritage.

"The law's your game, Jack. Can anyone sell a lessee's claim like Jerry Jones did, and get away with it?"

"Unless you had it in writing that such was not to be the case, I don't see that we've a leg to stand on. Of course, you did not. That appears to be the one thing you overlooked."

"I've known Jerry Jones most since he was a little brown kid running round with torn pants," mourned Salter. "I never guessed he'd bite me like that. Gosh! I wonder what Slum said to scare him over to the mainland? Me to get hit like that? If anyone wants to kick me, all they got to do is to say so. I won't lift a finger to stop 'em. I'm the original pudden-head."

"Surely there must be something we can do?" suggested Jean Salter hopefully.

Her father shook his head.

"I'm waiting to hear it. Ain't none of you got a suggestion?"

Apparently no one had. Indeed, they were so frankly at a deadlock that they could only sit and look at each other blankly. Finally Pete broke a silence which threatened to become oppressive.

"I'd say fight 'em. It ain't a brilliant idea, but it's the only one I've got."

Salter was about to reply when the door opened to admit George Judney and Sollum. Judney stood a moment looking round at the gloomy faces of his friends before he sat down quietly by the fireplace. The stout man, after one impatient glance towards the new-comers, said querulously.

" I'd like to, but where 'ud be the use. They could only be one ending to it. They've the law on their side it seems. Besides, they'd be three to one against us. They'd eat us alive. Ain't no one got any brainier idea than that ? Jean . . . they say a woman's wit is quicker than a man's. Ain't you or Peggy got a word to say ? I'm kind of uneasy in my mind."

The girl rose quietly and went to him. She stood by his chair, looking down into his face. She alone understood the complete dejection in her father's voice, read aright the tragic fear behind his eyes, for all his effort at nonchalance. Her tawny head went back protectingly, defiantly.

" Daddy . . . daddy, you know how gladly we'd help if we only could. There must be some way. There *shall* be some way. You're not to be despondent."

Her eyes suddenly encountered those of George Judney and she broke off. She stood with parted lips, staring at the old man in puzzled fashion. He returned the gaze steadily, the ghost of a smile about the corners of his bearded mouth. Slowly the girl raised her hand and pointed at him.

" George knows." Her woman's instinct rose triumphant. In her glad certainty she almost shouted the words. " George knows. George can tell us."

Salter whirled in his chair.

" George ? . . . By the Lord Harry, the girl's right. George . . . you've got an idea ? Out with it. Quick man ! "

He, too, pointed a fat shaking finger at the abashed hut-keeper. His eyes were shining queerly. On a sudden his voice broke.

" George ? . . . if I'm wrong I think it will break my heart. You've found a way out ? Tell us."

Judney's deep-set eyes met those of the stout man almost affectionately.

" You ain't wrong, Charley. I b'lieve you'll come out on top in spite of all that Frame can do."

He ceased abruptly, his gaze travelling from one to another of the expectant faces turned towards him. Into his voice crept a note of wistfulness.

" Folks, I'm getting on to be an old man. Man and boy I've tramped this old island for nigh on fifty years. Me and Joe have prospected up and down the coast here for almost more years than I care to remember. They ain't a sand-hill we haven't climbed ; not a creek we ain't camped by ; not

a nook or hollow of the plains that we ain't got to know as well almost as the creeping things that has their home there. They ain't a thing happened about the old plains that me and Sollum took notice of ; not a man nor woman come into the place that we ain't met and took stock of in our own way. Some of them people came to carve out a home for themselves amongst the big timber. Most of 'em stayed right on, in spite of the plague, and pest, and bitter hard times they had to face. They stayed because they loved the place. The outback always gets you the one way or the other. They ain't no jess tolerating country like this. Either you loves it or you hates it. They's no betwixt or between. Me and Joe here loves it. I reckon all of us here loves it. We've become part and parcel of the plains. We've grown into its ways. We know the coastlands for the great, wide, open, beautiful country that it is. We thought to always have it so. But what has happened ? "

Judney gazed around questioningly but no one ventured to reply. The hut-keeper raised his hand and brought it down on his knee with a smack. His voice lost its melancholy, drawling intonation. It became on a sudden sharp and penetrating, almost menacing.

" I'll tell you. There came to this coast a mob of greedy, crawling, spying speculators ; men that don't know what it means to have to do an honest day's toil ; men that know no single law of decency or restraint ; men that live only for one thing—money, and God help those that stand in the way of their getting it. They come and saw this beautiful big timber and pounced on it like a pack of wolves, tearing at each other with the dirty teeth of business trickery till the woods rang with their snarling and quarrelling."

He paused a second time. His cavernous eyes were smouldering strangely.

" God never made the forest for any little circle of red-faced crooks to play grab with. I know as well as you that the big trees wasn't only given us to look at. They was given us to be made use of, the same as every other help to man's existence that nature planted on this earth. But the using should be done for needs' sake, not money's sake. And me and you and the next man was meant to have an equal share so long as we had strength and courage enough to want it. But these men . . . they look to take it all. So far they've got it all."

Judney turned to the open-mouthed Salter.

" Charley, you'll be wondering why I'm saying all this. It's because me and Joe want you all to know jess where we stand, to know that him and me aim to help all we can. We're going to help fight Frame. Not because we want a share in what you make. We don't. But because they's not one of you here that ain't been good to us, that ain't done your best to let two poor old fossickers see that you ain't ashamed to call them your friends. Now show me that timber map Frame give to Mr. Heritage. Spread it on the table."

The stout man complied wonderingly. Judney placed a long, sinewy finger on the map and looked across at Pete.

" You remember that night Garraway tried to beat Joe up? They was mighty near a bad brawl that night. I smelt it coming, in spite of all you was trying to do to smooth things over. And so I took a chance shot at Slum and got him rattled. He was telling you to get off his land. Remember what I said to him then? "

The cattleman wrinkled his brows.

" You says, ' we'll get off your land jess as soon as ever you shows us where it is.' Of course, we all knew you was bluffing. Seems like Slum fell for it, all the same."

" Was it bluff? " said Judney. " I'm not so sure of that. If you ast me, I hit the mark pretty well for a pot shot—and Slum knew I hit it. What he didn't know though was whether I spoke plain knowledge or was only guessing. Until he found that out he had to go slow. So he pulled out, and called his dorgs off. I'll bet he's come to think by this time that I was jess plain fool after all. Which is what I wanted him to think."

From the pocket of his coat he produced a folded paper which he spread out by the side of Heritage's map.

" This here is the Guv'ment map of the timber holdings round The Bend. I wrote down to Hobart for it. Look at Frame's map (the map you've been working from) and then look at this other. Are they alike or ain't they? And if they're not, which of the two is most likely to be right? They ain't any argument. The Guv'ment map is *the* map. In a couple of words I'll tell you what's wrong. Frame and Garraway have been, and still are, *milking Crown Lands*. And what's more, you got a right-of-way down Frame's own tramline any time you like. That land ain't Frame's any more than it's yours. It's the property of the Crown.

If you slap in an application right away, you've got Garraway by his two ears. He can't do a single thing. He's *beat.*"

For a second or so following the hut-keeper's triumphant declaration there was an incredulous silence, broken only by the heavy breathing of Charley Salter. The stout man's little eyes were almost falling out of his head, his mouth was opening and shutting ridiculously. He appeared to Heritage like some corpulent fish drawn suddenly from its element to lie gasping upon the sands.

Jean Salter and Pete had their heads bent together over the maps. The cattleman straightened himself presently with grunt of suppressed excitement.

" George, I believe you've hit it. Where they's Frame's name filled in on the map he give Jack, they's nothing but blanks on the Guv'ment tracing. In the name of Mike, how did you drop to what was going on ? "

Having sprung his surprise Judney was again the unemotional, slow-speaking old man they knew so well. His voice issued from his interior in a drawling, melancholy rumble.

" Jess plain luck. Me and Joe heard Garraway and Login talking one time when they thought they was no one nigh. That set us to thinking. And when I fired that chance shot at Slum that night and seen how he kind of wriggled, I reckoned it 'ud maybe be a good thing to chase that idea of mine right into its burrow. So I got a real map. And now you know as much about it as I do."

All this time Salter had been sitting like a man in a trance. Now he came to life suddenly. In a single movement he was out of his seat and grabbing Judney's lean hand between his own two fat ones.

" George, we'll never forget this. I'm open to own up that jess a few minutes ago I thought we was down and out. Only for you we would have been. We'll none of us forget this."

In the stout man's voice was a genuine feeling ; his eyes were suspiciously bright.

" George, d'you know what we're going to do now ? We're going to apply for that bit of ground jess as soon as we can find a pen and bit of paper to do it with. This lets us out."

The display of gratitude seemed to embarrass Judney. He returned Salter's grip awkwardly.

" It ain't anything. Forget it," he rumbled. A slow grin came on his face. " What's the matter, Charley ? "

" It's that ding-busted sore pad of mine," said the stout man grimacing. " I'd clean forgot abont it till I jess happened to remember." He reached for his hat. " I'm going along home to dream I see Frame getting over the ground in our direction on his hands and knees. Well, solong ! "

He departed chuckling between Jean and Pete. A moment later George Judney rose to his feet and made unobtrusively for the door.

" George, don't you dare go before I make you and Joe some supper," called Peggy. " Now, don't be obstinate. It won't take me a minute."

She ran out into the kitchen without waiting a reply. Judney resdmed his seat beside the grinning Sollum, who took the opportunity to poke sly fun at his gaunt friend.

" Tea, George, eh ? Yes, says you, I could sure do with some tea. I sort of remember you like tea ! "

" Quite right," said Judney placidly. He turned to Heritage. " Jack, they's two men on Garraway's side that you want to watch. They've both got it in for you. I reckon I don't need to name either of 'em, eh ? "

" Rebner and Login ? " asked the young man.

" You say it," said Judney. " Of the two Rebner'll take the most looking after. Login's bad from his hair down, but he don't care who knows it. When Login's coming he roars so's you can hear him. But Gus is sly. He takes cover like a snake. And he don't like you."

" I'm not alarmed," smiled Heritage. " If Rebner plays tricks I shall do my best to scotch him. As for his not liking me—well, I don't like him. I disliked him from the first. Did you ever notice that he can't or won't look you straight in the face ? His eyes drop away. That's a bad sign."

" Gus is a foreigner," said the hut-keeper bluntly ; as if the fact explained the peculiarity. " Leastwise, his name sounds that way. Gustavus Rebner ? T'aint English, anyhow."

" German," volunteered Phil Adaire. " His mother was an Irish emigrant, but his father landed here from the Rhine direct. Rebner told me so himself years ago, when we were on better terms than we are now or ever shall be again."

" I kind of hate all foreigners," said Sollum. The little man's wizened face twisted humorously. " I'm sort of

reminded about the yarn Bill Hardie told me and George once about the dutchies. Rum names some of 'em have. They ain't hardly Christian by the sound of them."

"The dutchies?" queried Heritage.

"Come from Holland," explained Sollum. "You see they was once a whole colony of them come to live around Mount Monkey in the old days. The boss one was a feller calling himself Somebody or Other Van Nation. He was married and had eight or nine children. Well, one day the new Methodist Parson comes riding along on his first visit to the place. As he's going by old Van's place he sees one of the little girls sitting watching him from the top rail of the fence. Being kind of fond of all kiddies the parson pulls his off rein and jig-jogs across the road to have a little pitch."

"'What's your name, my pretty one?' says he, kind of soothing. 'Helen Van Nation, Sir,' says the kid. His Reverence looks at her like he don't quite understand. 'WHAT?' says he. 'Please, Sir, it's Helen Van Nation,' says the kid again. His Nibs wrinkles up his face till he looks like a sun-struck squid. He wears a kind of horrified look. If it weren't for his Sunday clothes he'd fall off his horse and have a fit. 'My child,' he says, 'this is terrible. Where . . . where did you learn to swear in such a dreadful manner?' 'Please, Sir, t'aint swearing,' says the kid, sort of frightened and snuffly at the nose. His Reverence is horrified some more. He puts his hand in the air and makes a noise in his throat like a broody hen. 'By heavens,' he says, 'would you add a falsehood to the load of sin already reposing on your immature soul?' he says. 'I ask you your name and you reply "Hell and Damnation." The Evil One is indeed busy in these parts. Where's your father?' he says. It took old Van half an hour explaining things in his broken English before his Reverence gets the hang of it."

"Joe! . . . Joe!" said Adaire reproachfully.

"True as death," defended the unabashed Sollum. "Bill Hardie was there and heard the whole thing."

Any further discussion was put an end to by the entry of Peggy. The two old men swallowed their supper hastily and departed. A little later Peggy pleaded tiredness and went to her room. Phil Adaire and Heritage were left alone.

Heritage eyed the frail figure of the old man with a feeling akin to pity.

"Mr. Adaire, I'm afraid you're overdoing it. You look quite done up. That isn't right, you know. We can't afford to have you ill."

Adaire smiled faintly.

"I'm stronger than you think. I am a little tired, certainly; but that is as it should be. We old folk knock up easily. What a glorious thing youth is. I envy all you young people; especially Pete Diamond. What tremendous vitality that man has; what perfect health and strength. I might also add what a good fellow he is, in spite of—well, in spite of certain rough elements in his make-up."

"I like Pete," said Heritage with conviction. He considered a moment. "And yet I don't quite understand him. Some of them here seem almost to fear him. Why is that?"

"The Pete you know is not the Pete of twelve months back," said the old man. "When I first met Pete he had the worst reputation of any man on the coast. That's saying a good deal. He was never free from trouble. Not that he was ever inclined to be vicious. But he was headstrong, intolerant of control, often violent. A typical example of a hard riding, hard swearing stockman; and reckless beyond belief. Pete always appealed to me as a man whose soul was too big for his body; one capable of big things, wonderful things, if he had been given a chance. His history accounts in part for the manner of man he was—and is. He practically reared himself. Such knowledge as he has is self-taught; learned in that hardest of all schools—experience. Yet after all there must always have been something noble in Pete's composition. See him now; how changed, how wonderfully changed. Strong and passionate as ever, yet chastened beyond understanding. You see, Mr. Heritage, he found what he needed; that is to say, a definite reason for existence. There came into his life an influence for good which must remain for all time."

"Jean Salter?" asked Heritage, marvelling.

Adaire made a motion of assent.

"Jean Salter, of course. So much may be wrought by a good woman. Some would tell you that Jean seeks degradation by mating with a man like Pete. I deny that absolutely. No man should be held responsible for the sins of his forebears. He may suffer—suffer intolerably; but his life will carry no stain but of his own making. With Pete the end is not yet. I often wonder what would happen were he to be

thrust back on himself as in the days we first knew him. God grant that will not happen."

"How did you come to meet him?" asked Heritage. "Was he bred on the coast here?"

For a second or two the old man gave no reply. He sat hunched in his chair, his eyes fixed broodingly on the dying embers of the fire. When he did speak his voice was strangely gentle.

"I was just thinking how little we know of the motives which actuate those around us. How easy it is to condemn where we do not understand. How harsh our judgments often are. Well—well . . . you were asking about Pete. The first time I saw him he was camped quite close to Berrigan's Gum. You don't know the big tree yet. At least, I have not heard you mention it. It is on the way to the cemetery at Grey Lagoon. It is an immense eucalypt, (swamp gum, I think) grey with age, and hollowed by countless fires. How it continues to maintain its equilibrium I do not know. Judging by appearance the least puff of wind should send it to earth, yet it continues to weather storm after storm. One day, I suppose, it will topple over. Then the district will have lost a curious relic of the old days."

Heritage was interested.

"Why was it named Berrigan's Gum?"

"Because an old trapper of that name once made his home in the burnt-out hollow of the tree's butt. Don't look so astonished. I assure you there are trees here and on the mainland where I am sure whole families might live at a pinch. However . . . Pete made his camp close to the old gum. That was five years ago. For a time he worked about the bush, taking splitting contracts, and so on. Then he took charge of the cattle run over the river. You know what he is doing to-day."

"I like Pete," said Heritage once more. "He seems a curious mixture. Why, do you know the first day I arrived at the Ferry house one of the men counselled me to speak Pete's name gently, if at all. He seemed positively afraid lest Pete should hear me. Of course, I now know that I was taken for a policeman. Even so, I fail to see why Pete should need to bother about it."

Adaire appeared to hesitate.

"Mr. Heritage, I should surely take you into our confidence. The fact is, Pete has not yet quite managed to disassociate himself from his old connections. For some

time he and others (to be frank, Login and Rebner) have been shooting and buying black possum skins for the mainland markets. The thing is quite illegal. If caught they will be called on to pay a heavy fine. In Pete's own case, I am afraid the penalty would be imprisonment. He was a good deal of a nuisance to the police at one time, and they have never quite forgiven him. However, this is his last season at skin running, as he calls it. I fancy he will be glad to shake himself free of Login and Rebner. I don't trust those two men. I think Pete is foolish to give himself so completely into their hands. He does not think so. While he dislikes them intensely and thinks them capable of almost any bad action, he refuses to believe that they would betray him in a matter of that kind. There you have a clue to Pete's character. Absolute loyalty in matters of friendship. To betray an associate is the unpardonable sin. He deems others of a like mind."

" I should be sorry to trust my character in the hands of Login or Rebner," said Heritage promptly.

" So should I. Well, in a little time Pete will break with them for good. I know he has promised that to Jean. And he will keep his word. Jean and Peggy between them will make something yet of Master Pete."

" I'm sure of that ! " said Heritage heartily. " Well, I'm off to bed. Anything I can do for you before I go ? "

" Nothing, thank you," said the old man.

For a long time he sat motionless before the burnt-out fire.

CHAPTER XV

CHARLEY SALTER attended to the details of his business with such caution that it was not until his surveyors were actually commencing work on Frame's ground that Garraway understood what was happening. Recovering from his first shock of angry surprise the manager lost no time in idle speculation. He came one morning to Salter's camp and demanded to see the stout man.

Sollum, who happened to be setting a saw in the shade of a bag shelter by the hut, jerked a grimy finger in the direction of their improvised office.

"Charley's inside. You looking for a new job?"

The sarcasm was not lost on Garraway. He shot Sollum such a vicious glance that the little man's grin wilted as suddenly as it had begun.

Salter met Garraway at the door. He led the way inside with no more than a perfunctory remark.

"Well, Mr. Garraway, what can I do for you?"

The manager exploded instantly.

"What's this about your grabbing the land at the head of my mill? You can't do that kind of thing here. I'll give you an hour to order those men away. If they stick I'll send some of my men over and clean the place up."

The stout man smiled.

"No good, Slum. Bluff's only food for kids. There we are and there we mean to stay. I always told you we reckoned to find a decent outlet."

"You can't have that one, anyhow," swore Garraway positively. "Why, do you know I could have those men arrested for trespass. And I will too! What's the matter with you, anyway?"

"They's nothing the matter with *me*. You don't want to try and interfere with my surveyors, Mr. Garraway. Don't forget they're Guv'ment men. Now the best thing you can do is to go over the rest of your holdings and see how much of it you hold title to."

To Garraway's storming he continued to turn a deaf ear. To each threat he had but a single answer.

"Turn about's fair play, Slum."

In the end the manager came to recognise the futility of prolonging the discussion.

"I'll break you for this though," he threw back over his shoulder as he made for the door.

"You've said that before—lots of times," retorted the stout man enjoyably. "Now don't go too far and spoil it all. We've only to drop a line to the Lands Office, and where are you? Not even Frame could pull you out of the soup."

Garraway faced about. His bulging eyes were snapping viciously. "You can't prove a thing on us," he boomed.

"They's a quarter mile of your wood rails laying on that bit of ground this minute," Salter reminded. "How you going to explain that away?"

"I can tear that line up in a night. Well, have it your own way. For the time being you certainly win. At least, that's how it seems to you. In a way I'm not sorry this has happened. Frame was getting careless. I've always told him there's a limit to meanness. But if you think this is going to make any real difference in the end, you've got another guess coming. I'm sorry for you, Salter."

"Thanks," said the stout man drily.

Garraway hesitated.

"Look here. I'd give a tidy bit to know who put you on to this game," he said finally.

Salter laughed outright.

"A little dicky-bird. And I'll bet it tells us lots more before we're through."

"You'll need all of it," snapped Garraway. He strode away fuming, his mind already grasping the sentences of the letter he must send to Frame.

Salter watched him go, a look of vast content on his fat face. At last things seemed to be shaping the way he wanted them. This revelation of George Judney's had miraculously altered the whole complexion of affairs. To grab a right-of-way under the very nose of the enemy was a piece of almost unbelievable good luck.

The succeeding fortnight brought no reversal of the situation. Work went steadily forward. Salter set his men to track-cutting on Frame's old block. In a week they had penetrated to the very heart of splitting operations. There-

after began to pass a steady procession of staves. Though the weather was dry, even now the ground was unfit for heavy cartage. Salter ran narrow haulage tracks here and there into the bush and brought out his staves on sledges drawn by two yoke teams. On the higher ground the timber was transhipped to horse drays and run quickly to a central space near the Government tramline and there stacked and weighted.

As time passed and nothing was heard of Frame, Salter could not restrain his jubilation.

" The old man's licked, and he knows it," he confided one day to Judney. " Next thing we know Frame himself will be along here looking round to see how he can come back at us. He can save himself that much trouble. He can't hurt us worth tuppence. I tell you we've got him by the short hair."

The hutkeeper assented, but hesitatingly.

" I b'lieve you're right. All the same, take my advice and watch out. They's more mischief brewing, for all Garraway's keeping so quiet. I doubt you'll get a sight of Frame jess yet. Men like him don't show up till they got to. When you sight Frame in the open you can bet he reckons things are mighty bad. We may sight him on this job yet, but not for awhile."

" I don't want to interfere with him so long as he don't interfere with me," said the stout man more soberly. " Gosh ! ain't they got enough work of his own without poking into other folk's business ? This don't make a bit of difference to Frame's mill. Their out-put will go on jess the same as ever. They're as busy as we are."

Salter spoke no more than the truth. Frame's mill was indeed unusually busy. The big timber man had secured additional contracts which made it imperative to use up every ounce of working pressure. For a time Garraway himself went back into the bnsh, speeding his men to the limit of endurance. The manager was everywhere at once ; arguing, explaining, exhorting ; using to the full his dominating personality. Only when it became certain that the work was well in hand did he return to the mill camp, there to throw himself into the task of reducing the correspondence accumulated during his absence.

Three days after his return he sent one afternoon for Login and Rebner. When the men arrived he called them into his office and shut the door. His next step was to unlock a

drawer of his desk and take out a letter. This he handed to Login.

The eyes of the squat section boss widened angrily as he read. In turn he tossed the missive across to Rebner.

"The old man's mad, talking like that," he muttered. "It ain't your fault, nor yet mine. The whole thing come about through his own damned meanness. If he'd applied for that ground like he should have, fat Salter and his crowd would have been beat to a frazzle by now. What are you going to do?"

Garraway grunted.

"What d'you think I'll do? It's no use talking back at a man like Frame. After all, if a man pays your salary he's got the right to tie his mistakes round your neck if he wants to. Let him roar. He'll be pleased enough by the time we've finished."

"You got something up your sleeve?" asked Rebner curiously.

Garraway affected indifference.

"Me? I haven't thought about it yet. It just struck me though that Salter would find it one thing to get his staves out to the line and quite another to arrange for transportation. Let him stack all he wants. I had a word with the new freight clerk the other day. Funny thing but he knows Frame well. Now Samuels—that's his name—ain't certain, but he thinks there may be a shortage of trucks this season. He advised me to book ahead. Of course a man can't neglect a hint of that kind. I reckon if we fill all the trucks I've ordered there'll be a glut of timber in the market."

The three men exchanged glances. Into the eyes of each came a little understanding twinkle. Rebner broke into a laugh.

"Good enough. I reckon I'll look that Samuels up on my own account."

"You let him alone," said Garraway quickly. The amusement left his face and was replaced by a heavy frown.

"That's the first thing I wanted to tell you. Keep it to yourselves. Here's something else. In spite of what I've repeatedly said someone continues to juggle whisky and such like into the camps along the line. You men know that is so as well as I do. Well, I've about reached the limit on this thing. Booze all you want to, but cut the sly grog. Go to the hotel at Green Valley, or where else you like, but

don't bring the stuff along here. Now I don't know a single thing. I'm just telling you, that's all."

Rebner's pale eyes flickered spitefully.

"Neither do we."

"I never said you did," retorted the manager. He banged his fist down on the bench beside him in a sudden spurt of anger. "I can tell you this though. If I catch the man that's doing it I'll shoot him clean off the coast. Now mind me. This mill is insured, but the logs in stack ain't. We can't afford to run risks. And you can bet that if this sort of thing keeps on sooner or later some boozy slob 'll drop a lighted match, and up she'll go. Now it's up to you two to help me run down this grog merchant. And for your own sakes I hope you've no finger in the business yourselves."

"Why not?" drawled Login.

Garraway looked at him pettishly.

"Because I've passed a hint along to the police. I don't want them poking about here any more than you do, but this business has got to stop. They know that skin running and grog selling has been going on up here for long enough, and I daresay they wouldn't mind a haul. Anyway, I've got plain orders from Frame, and I'm going to see myself clear. That's all I've got to say."

"All right," said Login, with a shrug of his shoulders. He rose clumsily to his feet and made for the door. "You won't want me any more to-day, eh? I got one or two things I want to see to."

Without waiting a reply he swung off across the yards. Crossing the line he climbed the rise to the sapling patch where his tent was pitched. As he pulled the tent flap aside something sprang past him into the open. He let out a furious oath.

"There's that thieving brute of Pete Diamond's again. I reckon it's time I showed him a point or two."

From the ridge-pole of the tent he reached down an old sporting Martini rifle, thrust in a cartridge and ran outside again. Pup had come to a standstill about three hundred yards away, his head turned towards the tent. On Login's appearance he began to bark, but did not offer to move. The man dropped to one knee and lifted the rifle to his shoulder. With savage cunning his finger curled around the trigger. He took deliberate aim.

At the instant of firing came an unlooked-for interruption. Login's name was called suddenly from behind. Startled,

the section boss half lowered his weapon ; and as quickly lifted it again. But his chance had gone. As if providentially warned the kangaroo dog had bounded onwards to the cover of the bushes ahead.

Login turned round angrily.

" You, Sadie ? Why couldn't you have held your tongue a second longer. You see what you did ? "

The girl met his gaze steadily. She was looking white and infinitely careworn, and the corners of her wide mouth drooped oddly.

" I'm sorry, Tom. But you was making a mistake, wasn't you, dear ? Why, that was Pete's kangaroo, Pup. you was aiming at. You didn't know that, of course. That was Pete's dog."

Login shifted uneasily.

" Was it now ? Pete's dog, eh ? I believe you're right. I reckon I mistook him for some other animal. Maybe it was as well you spoke up when you did."

He reached a none too gentle hand to the girl's wrist.

" What's fetched you along, old girl ? "

" I brought you a message from father," said Sadie. " He said to tell you that Hennessy won't be along this week-end." She stood hesitating a moment. The blood flushed her white face. " Ain't you glad to see me, Tom ? "

" Why, of course I am," muttered Login. He let go her wrist and stepped back. " You sort of scared me creeping on me like you done. So Hennessy's not coming, eh ? Why not ? "

The ungraciousness of the reply had its effect on the girl. The colour slowly receded from her cheeks. Her mouth trembled.

" I don't know. Father didn't say."

" All right, all right. It don't matter," said Login. He spoke less harshly, but his manner was frankly impatient. " How's the old man, anyhow ? "

" Dad's well enough," said Sadie quietly.

Login grinned.

" And so he'd ought to be. Don't do a kick from morning to night. A gentleman's life. What's been doing along at the Ferry ? You been busy ? "

At his change of manner the girl's face brightened pathetically. Her voice lost its note of depression.

" Dreadfully. Samphrey's have just crossed. Over a thousand head. The runs must be nearly empty now."

Her eyes sought Login's.

"Tom, there's a party coming through next week bound for the West Coast. They ain't cattlemen though."

"That so? Prospecting, likely."

Sadie shook her head.

"I don't think so. Dad says they're townies. Tom . . one of them is a parson. Tom . . . dear . . . ?"

"Now see here, Sadie," said Login deliberately, "I ain't going to be rushed like that."

She half extended one hand towards him, then let it fall again listlessly. Into her eyes came a hunted look.

"But you promised me."

Login shrugged his shoulders.

"I said when I was ready. You women ain't ever satisfied. You keep on pesting a man . . . pesting a man . . . "

Sadie's face crimsoned in anger. She came closer to him, peering into his eyes.

"You . . . brute," she said, in a low tone. Her voice choked. "Sometimes, do you know, I almost think I hate you. I believe you would break with me even now, if you could. But you dare not. Do you hear? You dare not! I know things . . . Oh, do you think you can frighten me with a look. Not now . . . not now. That time is past. What worse can happen? I wish to God I'd never seen your face."

She made as if to turn away, but Login caught her by the arm. "Don't be a little fool. Who said I wanted to break with you? You women are all alike. You ain't happy unless you're rushing things. Can't you trust me?"

"Can't I trust you? I dunno. God knows I've been trying to, but it ain't easy. If I am trusting, it's because I've got to, because there ain't anything else left for me to do." She threw up her arms in a swift, passionate gesture "What's the good of it all? Mine ain't been an easy life. I've seen little enough of happiness since I was so high . . . a little kid at school. The pretty things that girls like, the little innocent pleasures, the soft words . . . I've had none of them. I've never been able to remember my mother. And my father! . . . you know what *he* is. And yet I've been happy enough in my own way. In spite of it all I was happy once . . . if it's happiness to be let alone. Life wasn't so hard that I couldn't bear it. And there was

always the future to think of . . . and that's kinder than the past, God knows. I could pray them days. I could love the wild flowers and the birds and the talk of the waves coming in on the gutters along the coast. I could talk to them. But now . . . I can't feel like that any more. There's a change somehow. Them things are almost hateful to me now. I can't think of them. I daren't pray any more. Tom . . . I'm alone, I'm . . . *afraid.*"

Login was staring at her open-mouthed. His brute perception failed utterly to sense the tragedy in the monotonous voice. Sadie caught his look of amazement and laughed bitterly.

"You think I'm mad. Maybe I am. Mad as thousands before me, and for the same reason. What does it matter? Just a mad girl's dreams. You'd never understand. Maybe if I could die . . . Aye, why don't you kill me, and be done with it? It would be so easy. I should not try to stop you."

"Stop that talk," broke in Login roughly. For just a second there leapt into his eyes an indefinable something that checked the girl's wild utterance more surely than a blow. In spite of herself she could not repress a shiver. Login saw the movement and his features relaxed instantly.

"You ain't well, Sadie . . . talking like that. Why, if anyone was to hear you they'd think we wasn't friends. They'd be wrong, eh? You and me are going to get married pretty soon, ain't we? You bet we are. Only jess now it ain't possible. We're going to wait awhile till things settle down? Plenty of time, eh? You didn't think I was going to turn you down, old girl? That would be a joke of a think, wouldn't it? Now you jess give me a kiss and get back to your Dad. I'll come along on Saturday, and maybe we'll fix something up."

He put an arm about the girl and tried to draw her to him, but she freed herself with a quick motion. Her bosom heaved but her face remained pitifully impassive.

"No. That ain't any good, Tom. It's more than a kiss that's needed when they's a hope to mend. If you really love me they's a way to prove it."

Login stepped back sulkily.

"You're kind of unreasonable, ain't you? Well, you'll get over it. I'll fix things when I'm ready; not before. If it don't suit . . . ?"

Sadie made no answer. Without a glance at him she walked slowly away. Login stood looking after her with a curious intentness until she passed out of sight. Then, with a muttered exclamation, he re-entered the tent.

When he again emerged, some twenty minutes later, his appearance had undergone something of a transformation. His working clothes had been discarded for a suit of clean, if ill-fitting blue serge. About his neck was knotted a black silk handkerchief. A new felt hat sat awkwardly atop of his over-large head. He exuded a faint odour of yellow soap. Altogether he presented a rather absurd picture of complacent ugliness.

For a moment he stood looking about him, then strode away at a brisk pace in the direction of the plain. For half-an-hour he wound his way in and out along the narrow foot track until presently he debouched on open ground. A short distance ahead he could see Adaire's house nestling in its tiny half circle of tea-tree and honeysuckle bush. At sight of it Login's face lit expectantly. He increased his pace, striding over the button-grass until he reached the garden gate where he halted a moment and looked carefully about him before entering.

No one was in sight. A knock on the closed door of the house brought no response. Frowning Login pounded the wooden floor of the verandah with his heavy heel. His hand was outstretched to try the handle of the door when Phil Adaire came slowly round the end of the verandah. At sight of the old man Login ceased his tattoo. He held out his hand with an assumption of heartiness.

"Evening, Mr. Adaire. I jess took it into my head to drop in and see how you were getting on. I know business is business, and you and me is on opposite sides of the fence, but we might as well see something of one another between whiles, eh?"

It appeared that Adaire's bootlace had come undone. Apparently the re-tying of it gave him some trouble. When finally he straightened himself Login's hand had dropped to his side.

"Good evening, Tom. I'm very well, thank you. And you?"

"Pretty fair," said the section boss. "You ain't been too well, they tell me. And so you're right again now, eh?"

"Quite, thank you," said Adaire politely.

He stood patiently as if waiting to hear his visitor's real

reason for calling. The faint flicker of a smile appeared at the corners of his mouth.

Login pulled a pipe from his pocket and lit up. His impatience suddenly found crude expression.

"You're all on your own seemingly. I don't see Miss Peggy around. Ain't ill, is she?"

Adaire's amusement deepened; although he frowned a little at mention of his daughter's name.

"She's gone over to visit the Salters. As you say, I'm all alone at present."

"When's she coming back?" asked Login bluntly. His disappointment apparently made him careless of further restraint for he looked at the old man with a sudden sneer.

"I thought you was all that busy you couldn't hardly find time to eat your food? And here you are picnicking at each other's houses."

"We are busy," affirmed Adaire quietly. "At the same time, we must relax sometimes." He added with a touch of malice, "Things are going along so well that we can afford a day off now and then."

"The hell you can!" said Login, surprised into profanity. "Now ain't that nice. Still, I had an idea that Slum had you bottled up in the way he wanted. That's the way it looked to me. Maybe I was wrong."

"Evidently so," said Adaire with a smile.

"Well, don't be too sure of it," said Login.

His voice held so much assurance that Adaire looked at him in quick uneasiness. He began to wonder just how far in Garraway's confidence this great hulking brute of a man might be. The thought came to the old man that Frame was contemplating further interference.

"I see that band-box Heritage is still on the coast," resumed Login presently. "If he waits a little longer maybe I'll find time to help boost him out. The sooner the better, eh? You won't be sorry yourself to see the last of him?"

Adaire looked at him composedly.

"That's the second time you've suggested I had an interest in Mr. Heritage's departure. I don't know that I understand you, Tom. Jack Heritage is my friend."

"Well, you ought to know," said Login unpleasantly.

"You think not?" asked Adaire.

"I know it. Heritage is no more your friend than he is mine. Not that I'm interested much either way. I can

look after myself. Can you ?" Login eyed the old man with a kind of wolfish directness. "You got friends here all right, but Heritage ain't one of them. Nor he ain't any friend of . . . of Barkley's."

"Why bring that name into the conversation, Tom," said Adaire, after a little silence. He sat down on the floor of the verandah, as if suddenly tired.

"Oh, I dunno. I had a kind of thought. You can bet it ain't going to be easy for Barkley when young Heritage finds him. Men don't come all the way from the mainland to find another man and jess shake him by the hand and ask how his liver is. They's something at the back of things that you and me don't know. But we can guess a whole lot. I can put two and two together, even though I ain't any dressed-up town dolly. If I ain't flash like some folk, I'm all there when it comes to the count."

He continued to smoke indifferently.

"And what is it you know—or think you know ?" asked Adaire in a low voice.

Login smiled cruelly.

"Me ? Why, I don't know anything. I'm kind of sorry though for this man Barkley, whoever he is. I think I could help that man. And I'd like to see him put one over on that slob from the city. But of course Barkley ain't to know that, eh ?"

Adaire rose stiffly to his feet. He seemed to hesitate. Suddenly he raised his faded eyes directly to Login's face. His voice issued shrilly.

"What are you hinting at ? Are you . . . suggesting that I know anything of this man ?"

The unexpectedness of the question took Login aback. His jaw dropped ridiculously and he stared at the old man after the manner of one who sees his armoury suddenly dismantled. Then he laughed harshly.

"You're sort of guessing, ain't you, Phil ? Of course you don't know Barkley. You don't know what he done, nor anything about him. And a damn good job you don't. I wouldn't be in that man's shoes for something."

"Wouldn't you ?" said Adaire listlessly. His momentary spurt of courage had given place to a troubled silence. Or so it seemed to Login.

"It's going to be hell for Barkley," said the section boss once more. He waited a second. "Unless of course, he's

got sense enough to know who his real friends are, and listen to them when they talk. Now if I was Barkley, d'you know what I would do? I'd . . . but it don't interest you."

Adaire was trembling. As if suddenly chilled by the evening wind, he put up one thin hand to gather the flaps of his coat more tightly about his breast.

"That is so. Still, I'd like to hear your view. You were saying . . . ?"

Login grinned at the dusk.

"I was saying that if I was Barkley I'd get out from under, and leave things to my friends. I'd get along say to Hennessy's over at Green Valley, and lie low a bit until this part is made too warm for the man that was chasing me. This Heritage ain't lasting much longer. They's things in the wind now that point to a clean-up for Frame. That's a pity, seeing you're interested; but it's sure as death to happen. And when it does Heritage will float off the island clean scared to come back. He won't dare to show himself within a hundred miles of The Bend. How do I know it? Well, never mind. I do know it. Heritage will go. But until he does he's always open to wake up and find what he's looking for."

Adaire said nothing.

Login stirred impatiently. "That's what I'd do. I'd listen to my friends."

He knocked the ashes from his pipe and stretched himself.

"I reckon I'll be going now. More'n likely I'll look in again in a day or so. Well, solong!"

He moved away; but suddenly halted and looked back over his shoulder. His voice dropped to a husky whisper.

"Maybe when Barkley's ready to go he'll let me know?"

He seemed to wait expectantly. But Adaire gave no sign that he understood.

"Perhaps he would." He looked at Login abstractedly. "Why, were you expecting to hear of him then?"

With an oath Login turned away. In a few minutes the dusk had swallowed him up.

The old man went slowly into the house.

CHAPTER XVI

GEORGE JUDNEY sat by the open window of the hut. With cunning fingers he rolled long strands of hemp twine into snares meant to replace the worn or broken ones set along the banks of the creek which marked the eastern boundary of Salter's camp.

The bush was alive with the rich colouring of light and shade that sprang to the quickening touch of the afternoon sun. From the recesses of the timber came the twittering of innumerable birds, together with that indescribable medley of sweet elusive sound inhabiting the byeways of the bush. The warm air carried a faint echo of the falls on the Bat River, some forty chains distant, where an armlet of swift running water emptied on the north shore of Grey Lagoon. But one thing marred the serenity of the afternoon. This was the oft repeated strident chorus of a number of black jays scavenging around the precincts of the camp. Their curiously distinctive crying rang harshly through the clearing . . . kallah-kollah, kallah-kollah, kallah-kollah. At each unmusical repetition Sollum Joe, who was seated at the table mending a pair of dungaree trousers, scowled ferociously towards the offending birds.

"Drat them wretches," said the little man, for the twentieth time. "Allus yelling around the place worse'n a mob of crows." He glanced at his silent friend. "Speak up, George; I can't hear you?"

"I was thinking," explained Judney. "I'm jess telling myself I don't quite understand why Garraway hasn't tried any comeback at us. Here we are with nigh a hundred thousand staves ready for trucking. And they ain't done a thing."

"P'raps they can't," said Sollum.

"I'd like to think so. I'm not easy in my mind. After to-day we'll know a little more. Charley was going along to see the freight clerk and arrange for trucks."

Judney bent closer over his work, his hairy face puckered

thoughtfully. Sollum continued to stitch at his nether garments. Presently he began to sing in a high, cracked falsetto, remarkably imitative of the birds whose note he affected to despise.

"I like the cakes that mother makes,
I love her home-made jam;
But her plum duff it is enough
To make a man say damn."

"You sound like a packet of crackers," grumbled Judney. "Cut it out, will you? I want to go on thinking."

"You never did have any ear for music," complained Sollum. "What's the matter with this, anyhow?"

Without regarding the black looks of his friend he filled his lungs and burst forth anew:

"I take some pride in my inside,
And try to keep it well;
I love the cakes that mother makes,
But her plum duff is h—ll."

He subsided into grinning silence.

"That all of it?" asked Judney sourly.

"All I can remember."

The lank hut-keeper snorted contemptuously. "Maybe you think you can sing, Joe. When you was young and courting the gals, you didn't used to try and tickle their ears roaring at them like that, did you?"

"That ain't roaring," defended Sollum. "I know my limits as well as the next man, but I been musical all of my life. When I was a kid I used to treat the gals now and then. They never said they didn't like it."

"Explains why you ain't married," said Judney, with melancholy emphasis. "You make a noise like a waggon wheel shouting for grease. Any woman that 'ud take them sounds to her bosom is dippy."

"They's been strangers coming around The Bend this last day or so," he resumed, after a little silence. "More of Slum's friends, I suppose. I met one of them this morning. He was nosing about by the yards. Kind of silly I thought."

"I see him myself," said Sollum. "Sort of long, spindley feller, with a eye like a wood bug in mating time. Always

on the go. You could hear it click every time it settled in the socket."

"Say anything?"

"No. Neither did I."

Judney smiled gloomily. "Well, I did. He come right up to where I was standing and stood there looking at me. I says good-day, and he says the same. 'Looking for work?' I says. 'No,' says he. 'Well then, you've got what you want, haven't you?' I says. 'Yes,' says he."

"What did you say then?" demanded his friend.

The hut-keeper caressed his beard reminiscently.

"Joe, he was the most talkative feller I ever see, I believe. 'Can't you disburse yourself of any other noises than yes and no?' I asts him. 'No,' says he."

"Weren't deaf, was he?" asked Sollum anxiously. "Or dumb?"

"If he was he didn't say so. I tell you that man is the original word scatterer from the circus. After meeting up with him a dumb man could talk me to death, and anyone with a sign langwidge would bust my ear drums."

"Jess a button-grass tramp, most likely," said Sollum. His eyes wandered to the open window and he gave an exclamation:

"Here' Steve Strangways."

Judney, after one swift glance at the approaching man, put his work carefully aside and rose to his feet. About him was a certain air of expectancy. He rumbled softly:

"Anything the matter, Steve?"

Strangways nodded. He was a stout, muscular individual with sunburned cheeks and serious blue eyes. He puffed gently as he came in at the door.

"There's the devil to pay down at the mill head," he announced soberly.

Judney's deep-set eyes were twinkling with suppressed excitement. "Meaning?" he asked abruptly.

"We can't arrange for transport. It's not that they refuse to take the stuff, but there are no trucks to be got. Garraway has the lot. The boss is raving like a hornet. He says the whole thing is a slug up. When I came away he was trying to persuade Pete to get some of the boys together and collar what we want. Garraway's got his men bunched in the yards. I think he was playing for this from the first."

"Very likely," said Judney. He took a deep breath. "I was always frightened of something of this sort. Of

course, they can't block us for ever, but they can hold us up long enough to make trouble. Salter's under contract to deliver his staves within a certain time."

"I know that," said Strangways. "Well, Charley wants you along, George. They expect a scrap out of this. Garraway came down and ordered our men from the yards. You know his take-your-orders-and-be-damned-to-you style. Charley's mouth came open a foot wide. I swear I could count his tonsils."

Judney smiled grimly.

"I'll go along with you this very minute. Joe can stop here and see none of Slum's men interfere with the camp. It's what they would do, if they got a chance. If they's a scrap coming I'd like to do my share. I'm not too old yet to get in a jolt or two that'll hurt some one."

He stood a moment looking at his friends . . lean, grey and wrinkled as an old badger, yet with the confident poise which bespoke the eternal youth of that fighting spirit which had carried him triumphantly over half a century of adventuring.

"Well, solong, Joe," he said unemotionally.

Outside Frame's mill yards a curious scene was being enacted. By the side of the line a number of men were grouped around Charley Salter and Pete. A little apart stood Heritage, his face flushed and angry. A rough barrier of dead-wood had been hastily erected across the gap which gave entry to the yards themselves. On the far side of this barrier, his arms resting on the rough spars, was Garraway. At his side was the government freight clerk, Samuels, with Gus Rebner peering over his shoulder. Behind them again, and spread fan-wise so as to control both the approaches to the sheds, were the remainder of Frame's bush-whackers, a motley crew attired in almost every conceivable array of undress. The low hum of voices filled the air.

As Judney and Strangways slipped quietly in among their friends Garraway began to address himself directly to Heritage.

"They keep telling me you're a lawyer. Well, what sort of a game do you call this? You apply for trucks and can't get them. You're told civilly enough that there ain't any available. It's a thing that might happen to anyone. If you'd known your business you'd have ordered what you wanted months ago; the same as I did. It's your own fault. Why come snivelling to me about it?"

"Because we know perfectly well that you made a corner deliberately," said Heritage, hotly. "This is a scheme pure and simple. I warn that man there that if he doesn't immediately forward our application to the proper authorities I'll report him as incompetent. We applied for a string of trucks over a fortnight back. Why aren't they here?"

"I told you there weren't any available," said Samuels sulkily. "On a small gauge line like this the accommodation is limited. First come, first served. You've to wait your turn. We can't serve the lot of you at once. As for your application I sent it along the day you lodged it. I told you what the reply was."

"Show me the correspondence," said Heritage quickly.

Garraway interposed with a laugh.

"Nothing doing! Tell them to go hang themselves, Samuels."

"You land thieves," said Heritage, with all the contempt he could muster. "You couldn't go straight for five minutes. You're crooked as h—ll."

The manager's face went purple. He climbed to the top of the barrier and beat on the rough wood with his clenched fist.

"That's enough from you. I'll tell you this much. You're on Frame's land now, whatever you were on that last time. Get away home, the lot of you. You make me tired. Why, you poor dubs, did you think you could get to windwards of a man like Sam Frame? Before he's finished with you you'll wish to God you'd had sense enough to mind your own business."

"Just a second Mr. Garraway," said Heritage choking. "I suppose you're counting on Frame's political pull to get him free of any dirty work he likes to tackle. Don't be too sure of that! We're not entirely without influence ourselves. You can threaten as much as you like, but you'll get a showing up one of these fine days that will make you sick."

In his excitement the young man would have said more, but that Pete Diamond gripped his arm warningly.

"Go easy, Jack," he advised. "If they want a rough-up let them start it themselves."

Garraway still held his position on top of the barrier. He was joined by Rebner. The latter looked about him with a sneer.

"You're a whale of a lawyer, you are, Heritage. You don't know the first thing about it. Out here we make the

laws to suit ourselves. You go ahead playing hide-and-seek with that man Barkley, and don't butt in on a man's job."

Heritage turned in a flash.

"What? It's you, Rebner, is it? I thought I'd quietened you for quite a long time. Looking for more, are you?"

Even Garraway's men joined in the laugh which greeted the taunt. Rebner snarled speechlessly. Before he could frame a reply Heritage once more addressed himself to Garraway:

"I'd like to make a final appeal to your commonsense. What do you hope to gain by holding us up in this manner? Sooner or later we're bound to get the trucks we want. All through the piece we've kept to the letter of the law. We've gone about our work as quietly and decently as we could. I can't say that of you. You can't even say it of yourself. Now, don't try us too far. If you do perhaps you'll one day find the police along here to ask you a few leading questions."

Garraway had been doing some swift thinking. None knew better than himself the doubtful legality of his present action. That he should acquire every available truck on the small line connecting his mill with the shipping jetty at Sun Port was in itself of no unusual significance. Such might be accepted as the natural foresight of any firm anxious to fulfil its business obligations without hitch. It had, indeed, frequently happened that, in order to cope with ever increasing orders, Frame found it necessary to wire him an order which practically amounted to a transport corner. Frame's connection with officialdom had always enabled him to silence the grumblings of his small rivals up and down the line.

The present occasion, however, differed to the extent that no such imperative necessity could be found. Busy they were undoubtedly; yet recently additions had been made to the rolling stock on the line which amply provided against any possible increase of traffic. If it were suggested that the present shortage of trucks was the result of an understanding between himself and the freight clerk, Garraway felt that unpleasant complications were likely to ensue. He quickly decided therefore that it was necessary to introduce something in the nature of a diversion; to side-track the original argument, as it might be, by making a definite appeal to the anger of his opponents. If he could goad them to the point where they attempted to take the law into their

own hands, so much would be ultimately in his favour. Garraway's ever fertile malice suggested a dozen ways by which he might cause the action to be regarded as the outcome solely of uncharitable grievance or angry disappointment. Beyond that the manager's mind refused to carry him. He saw only an opportunity to further entangle the situation to his advantage. Behind the intention lay infinite possibilities. The thought helped to swell his confidence. With a swift appraisement of the chances he decided on his line of action.

"You've said your say, now listen to me," he boomed. "You talk of the police? You? Take my advice and leave the police alone. You've a deal more to fear from them than ever I have. As sure as you bring them into this you'll be sorry to the end of time."

The threat was addressed to Heritage, but it was Charley Salter that answered. The stout man was scarlet. Perspiration streaked his cheeks. His voice trembled with mingled annoyance and apprehension.

"You can't jump the rails that way, Slum. We ain't a mite to fear; and you know it."

"I'm damned if I do," snapped Garraway instantly. He looked at Salter with burning insolence. "There's gaol ahead for more than one of you."

"Bluff, Slum . . . just bluff," affirmed Salter. "Maybe you'd like to tell us what you think you know. Come now?"

The manager's eyes flashed wickedly.

"I will then. Someone's been peddling whiskey in this camp ever since I took charge. It's a business I don't hold with for reasons of my own. For long enough I've tried to find out who was responsible, but I had no luck until just awhile ago. I'm learning things fast. And what I can learn, so can the police. They'll find the man they want among your crowd. I'll go further than that. If you like I'll put a name to him. Ah, I thought that would hit you."

The stout man's face was a study in bewilderment. The unexpectedness, the absurdity of the accusation almost deprived him of coherence. He puffed out his cheeks in indignant amazement.

"Well, by gum! You've got gall, you have. You mean to tell me that one of us would mix in a dirty business like that? Not on your life, Slum. Come again, you big Annanias—you. One of my men, eh?"

"I said it," repeated Garraway watchfully. He hesitated

the fraction of a minute. "It's one of your men, right enough. If you want his name . . . " he paused a second time, his tongue moistening his thick lips . . . "how will Pete Diamond suit you?"

There was an electric silence. The air seemed of a sudden to be charged with tremendous portent. Someone at the manager's back laughed harshly . . . a nasty, sneering laugh, fraught with infinite malice.

For an instant Pete stood as if stunned. Then he strode past Heritage to where Garraway, wickedly watchful, crouched on the barrier.

Again there came a pause as the eyes of the two big men met in one tremendous stare of burning hatred. Pete's head went up; his shoulders set squarely. And then with a suddenness totally unlooked for, his hands went out and gripped Garraway by the neck, as a terrier grips a rat, plucking the manager from his perch and sending him reeling with a terrific smash in the face.

"You damnable liar and crook," shouted the cattleman.

Garraway came back bellowing with rage. Hitting savagely the two men clinched and spun madly across the narrow intervening space.

It was the signal for a general mêlée. With a swiftness which hinted at pre-arranged, concerted action, Frame's men swarmed to the attack. For the second time since coming to Timber Bend Heritage found himself the unwilling centre of a fighting, blaspheming mob. He had a confused impression of swirling faces and wildly threshing limbs; the reek of sweat filled his nostrils; his ears rang with the dull thud of blows. Long since he had lost sight of Pete and Garraway. They had vanished in that first wild onrush of the crowd. Heritage fought on doggedly; heartened, all at once, by the recognition of George Judney at his side. As previously they fought their way to the outskirts of the mob. On the point of escape they were taken unawares by a wave of fighting and driven inwards again. A man sprang at Heritage with a hardwood stave uplifted to strike. The tide caught him and swept him onwards before he could deliver the blow. Heritage had a momentary glimpse of his face. Somehow he was not in the least surprised to recognise the greasy black hair and pale, spiteful eyes of Gus Rebner.

All at once the jam of bodies loosened. As by common consent both parties drew off for breathing space. With Judney on one side of him and Steve Strangways on the

other, Heritage backed against a log stack and came to rest panting. His head rang, and the knuckles of both his hands were raw and bleeding. Judney was in even worse shape. The hutkeeper's beard was a mat of red. As Heritage looked anxiously at him he grinned and spat out a couple of dislodged teeth. Strangways nursed a twisted arm.

Heritage found himself looking round for Charley Salter. Discovering him the young man could hardly restrain a grin of sheer amusement. The stout leader had jammed his unwieldy bulk into the burnt-out hollow of a gum shell. On his face was a ludicrous expression of horror. His eyes protruded; his features were puckered like those of an infant on the verge of tears. His two hands grasped the handle of an iron hand-dog. He held the weapon before him determinedly, yet it was plain he dreaded the thought of using it. Sooner would he burrow still deeper into the sheltering recess of the tree which had been his refuge for the past few minutes.

Heritage went towards Salter with the idea of learning what more might be expected. Half-way there he was joined by Pete Diamond. To all appearance the cattleman had emerged from the struggle with nothing more serious than a bruised face and some damage to his clothing. Heritage found himself wondering how Garraway had fared.

"Slum ain't hurt any more than me," said Pete, appearing to guess the thought. "The rush pulled us apart."

He was interrupted by Charley Salter. The stout man had dropped his weapon. He stood looking at his friends with lack-lustre eyes. He exclaimed feebly:

"Gosh, what a mix up! Did I kill anybody? Good boys. I seen you laying it on, Jack. Whoof . . . jess like that! Good God, what are we going to do now?"

"Pull out and talk it over, I suppose," said Pete. His jaw set stubbornly. "I've a mind to hunt Garraway out and finish it."

"Let be—let be!" advised Salter querulously. "Pete, you know what Jeannie thinks."

"Garraway is calling to us," interjected Heritage.

Pete turned swiftly about, his big body poised as lightly as a cat's. Garraway approached them slowly, his hand raised as if to indicate a truce. Heritage saw that the manager limped. His shirt, ripped almost to the waist, disclosed a hairy body mottled with bruises.

"Hold your men away, Salter," he rumbled, while yet at a

distance. "This thing's gone too far now to be settled by a scrap. We'll see what the courts think of it. Trespass and assault, eh? I'll see you right through to the end now. You took the lid off hell when you started this fight and you're going to smell sulphur till your nose burns."

Pete laughed derisively.

"What a bluffer you are, Slum. You know too much to bring the law into this. Try it and see how you get on."

Garraway looked at him bitterly.

"I think I will. In the meantime clear off this land. That's my order as Mr. Frame's manager. You can please yourselves, of course, whether you go or not. But I can tell you this much, the next mix-up will be the last for some of you. In half an hour if you ain't gone I'll finish this to suit myself.

He turned away quivering.

Pete looked curiously at Salter.

"Well, Charley, what about it? You're the boss. Do we go, or don't we? And if we do, what's the next move?"

The stout man emerged with difficulty from his refuge. He stood a moment rubbing his hands and gazing after Garraway's retreating figure.

"I know how you feel, Pete," he said at length, "but it ain't any use. Slum's got enough men there to eat us up. We'll go home and talk it over. Gosh! what a mix-up. Anyone hurt?"

"Nothing to speak of, I believe," said Heritage. A sudden thought occurred to him. "By the way, what became of Login? He was here when the argument began, but I haven't seen him since."

"Don't know and don't care," said the stout man crossly. "I seen him edging to one side jess as Pete yanked Garraway off the fence, and that's all I know. Maybe he hadn't any stomach for scrapping." Salter looked at Heritage appealingly, "I . . . they's times, you know, Jack, when a man's liver is kind of bilious."

"Certainly," assented Heritage gravely. He exchanged a delighted wink with Pete. "In that case, of course, it's always well to avoid excitement."

The cattleman was rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"We'd best get back to work, Charley. The men's pay is going on all the time. We can talk about this to-night."

Salter suddenly wakened to consciousness of his leadership.

" Gosh ! look at the sun, will you ? Pete, round the lads up. We'll get right back to the stacking."

He turned to Heritage :

" Jack, I'd be glad if you'd take along a message to Mrs. Salter if you ain't too done up p'raps you won't mind going. Jean'll give you your tea. Or maybe you'll be calling in at Adaire's ? "

" Of course I'll go," said Heritage. " I'll go back to camp and brush up a bit first though. Don't want to frighten the ladies into fits. What's your message ? "

As he passed the cook's hut on the way to his tent he was cheered by the sight of Sollum Joe sitting on the doorstep with his ancient shot-gun balanced across his knees. The little man waved to him excitedly.

" They tell me Slum got it in the neck ? " he shrilled.

Heritage grinned and went on to his tent. Here a surprise awaited him. Pinned to the canvas wall was a sheet of paper. On it was printed in clumsy characters :

" Heritage . . . if you want Barkley why don't you ask Adaire ? "

There was no signature.

" Well, I'll be darned," ejaculated the young man. He held the paper up to the light and examined it again carefully, racking his brains to discover who might have sent the message.

" But I have asked Adaire," he thought. Then laughed to find he had spoken the words aloud. He threw the paper on his bunk while he changed his clothes. With the healthy man's contempt for anonymity in the matter of correspondence, he strove to cut the thing from his mind. Yet somehow he found himself repeating the message in his thoughts with a persistence little short of annoying. He picked up the paper and studied it anew, but could make nothing of it.

" Confound it, I've asked Adaire a hundred times," he said to himself. " Well, if it will please anybody I'll ask him again. No harm in that. Now I wonder what somebody's game is ? "

Of course the whole thing was a hoax of some kind. Still it would serve as an excuse to call in at Adaire's on his way back from Salter's. Regarded in that light the message was a blessing in disguise. Since Heritage had shifted his quarters to the camp in the bush he had seen little of the Adaires. Now he would call in and see how the old man was faring. He would see Peggy too, of course.

The last thought set Heritage's heart beating even more rapidly than had the strenuous tussle of a short half-hour back. Quite suddenly he understood what this girl meant to him. He was amazed to discover the passion that surged over him on remembrance of her sweet face, the winning tones of her voice. To see this wonder-girl again and speak to her . . . to feast glad eyes on her shy ones . . .

Outside the tent the little clearing lay shadow-barred beneath the clouded rays of the setting sun. The air was sweet with the fragrance of evening. In the spreading heads of the trees the night wind stirred softly with the musical cadence of far-away harps, through which pierced faintly the curiously human murmur of the waves creeping up the wide beaches of the coast beyond. The sounds wove themselves to an exquisite sympathy, seeming as the hushed and reverent harmony of some invisible choir that sang the lullaby of drowsing earth.

To Heritage, flushed and trembling, the moment was one of infinite wonder. His imagination peopled the quiet spaces of the bush with a multitude of dead and gone lovers whose voices joined in one vast symphony of throbbing echoes. Down the æons their songs were calling . . . calling tumultuously.

With hands that shook he fastened the flap of the tent.

CHAPTER XVII

OLD Phil Adaire greeted his daughter's return with undisguised relief.

" I'm afraid I'm getting too old and crochety to be satisfied for long with my own company," he confessed whimsically. " Of course, I've been glad for you to have Jean's company, but it's been lonely without you, Peg."

The girl patted his arm affectionately.

" You poor old dad. Why, I worried quite a lot about you. And you're really glad to have me back, eh ? "

" Child, what a question." He smiled at her mistily. " Don't you know you're all I have ? Could I be happy for long without you ? And yet, of course, I can't always expect to have you with me. Youth must be served. Sometimes I've been troubled to think that my selfishness has spoiled your life. You should be among the young folks. I've kept you here away from life and . . . and love."

Her soft hand on his lips checked his further utterance.

" Daddy . . . how can you ? As if anything could matter so long as we are together. I won't listen to a word. The idea of you reproaching yourself. I've been perfectly happy. Do you hear ? I've been tremendously happy. And why not ? When I've got the dearest father in the world."

The old man's lips trembled.

" Do you think so, child ? I've tried my best to do what was right for us both. Yet I can't deny that young people find greatest happiness in themselves. One day, please God, I shall take you back to the light and laughter where you belong. Just a little while longer, Peg ; just a little time. Surely everything will come right in a little time."

A troubled look passed over Peggy's face.

" Of course, dear. Now you just settle down and rest. I'm going to tidy up the house. Goodness ! what untidy things men are. It's high time I came home."

Towards evening she escaped gladly into the open air and

wandered slowly along the crest of the hill. Heritage, turning a corner of the track, came suddenly upon her and halted in sheer enjoyment of the surprise.

Peggy smiled a little at his confused greeting.

"I believe you are ashamed of yourself for neglecting us so badly of late," she said. "Of what use is a boarder who spends all his time grubbing away in the bush. Oh, Mr. Heritage, do tell me the news! I can see by your face that something has happened."

"Garraway has launched a counter-attack," he told her. He related the events of the afternoon. "But I think we shall weather through all right," he finished. "The incident is annoying, but hardly dangerous. I'm bound now for Salter's with a message for the old lady. On my way back I intended to call and see your father. For that matter I still mean to. Should I be disturbing him, do you think?"

"Why should you think so?" The puzzled look on her face made Heritage inwardly revile his trick of conventional speech. More than ever he recognised the inherent simplicity of these people so far removed from the multieloquence of modern society.

"He is well, I hope?" he asked, in an effort to cover his self-disgust.

"He is very quiet, but otherwise well. You know I have been staying with Jean Salter. I only returned home to-day. Father missed me, I think. And sometimes he is very depressed. It is like that with him now. He just sits and seems to brood."

"I wish I could do something to help you cheer him up," said Heritage sincerely.

Both the girl and himself were unaware of a sudden swaying of the bushes a bare twenty paces away. Into the open stepped Tom Login. For a moment he regarded the unconscious pair with a hateful sneer. Then he moved silently away in the direction of Adaire's house.

"You know that I would do anything to please your father . . . or yourself," continued Heritage gently. He stole a swift glance at her face, his heart leaping absurdly as he met the friendliness in her grey eyes. Never had she seemed so sweet, so eminently desirable. "I wonder if I could persuade you to walk a little of the way to Salter's with me? I could tell you something of what we have been doing at the camp."

Peggy smiled at him frankly. A wave of colour came over her face.

"Just a little way then. I should enjoy the walk. All day I've been shut indoors, and I do so love the open. Isn't the summer delicious. One soft, scented evening like this and all the long, cold days of winter are forgotten. If only we might forget our troubles as easily. And yet how much there is to be thankful for."

Heritage nodded silently. At that moment he hardly dared trust himself to speak, so fateful were the words which trembled on his lips. Peggy looked at him in sudden concern.

"Does my chatter tire you? How selfish of me. You are tired with your work already. Please forgive me."

She touched his arm contritely. At the contact the last vestige of self-control deserted him. He stopped in his stride so abruptly as almost to startle her. For a long moment he gazed at her tongue-tied, devouring her slender beauty with his eyes. Then the barriers that pent his love went headlong under a flood of pleading passionate words.

"Peggy . . . my Peggy Adaire! No; don't shrink from me. Good God! do you think I would harm the tiniest hair of your dear head. If I frighten you, forgive me. How can I keep silence any longer? If I could only find words to make you understand how much you are to me . . . how I love and honour you above all women. Dearest . . . why, you're trembling . . . you're trembling?"

He caught her hands in his own, where they seemed to flutter like the soft wings of a prisoned bird. She swayed a little on her feet and her eyes half closed. As he waited in an agony of suspense they widened again with such a glory of light in their grey depths that he caught his breath in wonder.

"Peggy? . . ." he cried.

Her voice came hardly above a whisper.

"Jack . . . Oh, I've cared . . . always, it seems."

Low as the words were, his eager ears caught them.

"My dearest . . . my wonder girl!"

He crushed her to him, lifting her arms about his neck so that their faces almost touched. The breath from between her parted lips intoxicated him like a draught of wine; the warmth of her young body, clinging to his in a kind of innocent abandon, stirred him to an awed reverence that plumbed

the very depths of his manhood. Slowly, almost fearfully, he met her lips.

All around them lay the silver dusk, wrapping the old plains in a veil of pulsing luminance that stretched on and on into the deepening void of the night sky. From the purple shadows of the timber belt Heritage's invisible choir flooded the world with an ecstacy of whispered melody. And overhead the stars . . . pin-points of glory pricked upon the shadowy curtain of the dark.

Very gently Heritage released the girl. His voice came a little hoarsely:

"Peggy . . . how wonderful! That you should care for me. I had hoped . . . and yet how desperately I feared. Some things are beyond our understanding. If I fail in any one thing towards you, may God do so to me—and more also."

She smiled up at him with absolute trust.

"I know. I don't try to understand. I only know that I love and am loved. Jack . . . how dear the world is."

"Your father?" asked Heritage presently. "I wonder what he will say? He will understand surely."

"I couldn't bear to leave him yet," said the girl softly. "Jack . . . why is it, I wonder, that even in our greatest happiness lies coiled a sting. Poor old dad . . . such chums we've always been! Such a dear father. When . . . my mother died, I was all he had to love. He would die of loneliness . . ."

Heritage laughed happily.

"We won't give him the chance. Dear, do you think I would part you? Where we go so must he. Our home shall be his home. You will tell him to-night?"

"Yes. You must go now. But you will come back?"

"As soon as I deliver my message," said Heritage. He kissed her gently. "When you hear me whistle run up to the gate to meet me. Good-bye . . . for just a little while . . . my wonder girl."

Peggy stood looking after him until the darkness swallowed him from her sight. Then, with glowing cheeks, she turned homewards. A light greeted her from the window of the sitting-room. The blind was not drawn, and she could see the frail figure of her father seated by the table. At sight of him a little tender smile came on her lips and she quickened her footsteps.

As she entered the room Adaire straightened abruptly.

He turned half round; then, recognising her, sank back again into his chair. In his attitude was something so furtive, so entirely foreign to his usual deliberate manner that the girl was filled with a nameless foreboding. She slipped an arm about his neck.

"Daddy . . . aren't you well? Oh, what is it?"

Adaire looked at her in silence. To Peggy's shocked consciousness he appeared suddenly to have become indescribably old and shrunken. The misery of his eyes frightened her. All at once she felt her happiness slipping from her like a garment. She dropped on her knees by the side of the chair.

"Daddy . . . Oh, daddy! Don't look at me like that. Something has happened. Oh, what is it?"

CHAPTER XVIII

HERITAGE made no mention to the Salters of his meeting with Peggy Adaire. Just then he felt that it was impossible for him to share this wonderful confidence with others. A great new fact had entered his life. He wanted to hug it to himself—exulting, yet a little bewildered; tasting each thought a thousand times, as one might taste, by drops, some precious elixir miraculously evidenced before his delighted eyes. For a brief while he touched the heights of exaltation; the future, rose-tinted, glowing with wonderful dreams that led onward to an ecstasy of thought.

As Heritage swung light-heartedly across the slope of the hill on his return journey, his eager eyes were quick to discover the white-clad figure of the girl waiting at the gate ahead. He called instantly: "Peg? Is it you, dearest? To see you there so still and quiet . . . do you know what it reminds me of? It brings back to me the night I first saw you, that wonderful, moon-kissed night in the garden where you sang your way into my heart. After that there was never a thought of any other girl for me. The gleam of your eyes and the sheen of your hair . . ." he broke off suddenly, his heart fluttering at his throat. "Peggy, what's wrong? Why do you stare at me so? You are not ill? Good God, you almost frightened me."

"Did I?" said the girl, in a low voice. "I'm sorry. I did not wish to do that. No; I am not ill. Just a little tired and . . . unhappy."

Heritage peered incredulously.

"Unhappy? You? On this wonderful, wonderful night? Why, little girl, that can't be. And yet your voice . . . You're overtired. It was selfish of me to ask you to wait for me like this. I never thought that way. I had no thought of anything but just to see you again . . . to keep on telling you, over and over, how I love and honour you above all women . . . you dear, sweet, glorious girl."

Peggy raised her hand to her throat as if it were hurting.

"Oh, don't . . don't!" She seemed to struggle, as if the words would not come. Through the branching leaves of the gums the faint light of the stars shone directly on her white, upturned face. "Don't say that any more. Never any more. It was all a . . . mistake. How you will hate me. It was a mistake. I can be nothing to you. I want to tell you that before it is too . . . late. It was all a mistake."

In the stark silence that followed the stammered words she heard the sharp, bewildered intake of his breath. She saw his shoulders straighten ominously.

"A mistake? Peggy . . . do you know what you are saying? It was not a mistake." He paused; and once more came that agonised catching of his breath. Into his voice came a grim note. "Unless, of course, you have only been . . . amusing yourself with me. There are some girls, I know, that . . . do that sort of thing. But you . . . ?" Of a sudden he broke out passionately. "But you . . . you are not like that. You're not that kind of . . . of beautiful devil. There's something behind this that I know nothing of. What is it? To say you do not love me is not enough. You do love me. Your lips may hide the truth, but your eyes . . . I read it in your eyes . . . God, how long ago was it? Are heaven and hell so close together then? Peggy . . . won't you believe that nothing has happened—nothing *could* happen to part us? I will not let you go."

He made a quick movement towards her but Peggy stayed him with a gesture. He drew back again with a bitter laugh.

"It is true then? And yet . . . how can I believe it? To me the thing appears incredible. Simply to have amused yourself with me. God forgive me, what am I saying? Not you—not you to do a thing like that. Others might; but you're too sweet and clean and honest-souled to send a man to hell that way. Peggy . . . Peggy; won't you trust me, dear?"

With sudden passion he caught her to him, smothering her face against his. This time she made no effort to repel him. For one blessed moment she clung to him—speechlessly, trembling in every limb. But only for a moment. Very gently she freed herself from his arms.

"No, Jack; not again, never again. Oh . . . at the least let me be honest with you—and myself. I dare not deny my love. At first I tried . . . I thought it would

be the kindest . . . Life was such a beautiful thing. I was so happy . . . too happy. And now? . . . My dear—my dear, I do love you . . . with all my heart and soul. I thank God that I may take that much of comfort with me to help face the years to come. And yet there is a barrier between us that may not yield to any earthly persuasion. Oh, do you think I would speak like this if I were not sure? Even although you do not understand—and I pray God you will never understand—won't you believe that this is irrevocable. That is the hardest part of all—that I can never explain. Am I not suffering, too? Yet I know that it is better to part from you now in the courage of a love unshamed by any selfish thought, than later to bow to the inevitable. The kindest thing that might happen for both of us would be for you to leave this place for ever. And I can tell you that, even though my heart is breaking."

"But why? In God's name, why?" burst out Heritage. For him this meant the end of all things, the renunciation of the most beautiful ideal of his life, the shattering for ever of a wonderful, God-sent dream. In a flash his mind went back to the day when first he came to The Bend. Here once more, when he had thought to have made an end of it for ever, was the same baffling complexity of purpose, the same damnable intrusion of the unknown. The bitter injustice of it all drove him well-nigh frantic.

"You want me to leave you—to forget you. Such a thing is not possible. You ask too much. Can't you see that it is too late now? I am deliberately to thrust aside my happiness and yours for . . . what? For aught I know some happening, some misunderstanding, totally unworthy of the sacrifice. A few hours you could promise your whole life to me; now you refuse me even the confidence that is mine of right. I'm blind to even a suspicion of what has happened. I'm like a man groping in the dark. I haven't even the chance to fight for my happiness. Peggy . . . are you going to send me out of your life without a word of reasonable explanation?"

He heard her sob in the darkness.

"You make it doubly hard for me. No; don't touch me again. I daren't trust myself to remember. There is nothing else I can say. You must think of me as you will."

The suffering in her voice silenced him as nothing else could have. All at once his mood changed. An infinite pity took possession of him.

"As you will then, Peggy," he said gently. "I don't understand, of course. And it seems fated that my life here should be one of continual misunderstanding and perplexity. But I'm not going to distress you any further. So far as I can I will obey your wishes. I would even leave Timber Bend, if by so doing I could best serve your interest, only that just now is out of the question. I must stand by my friends until they have no further need of me. When that time comes . . . and yet I believe that one day you will give me your whole confidence. You must . . . you surely must."

"Never!" whispered the girl passionately.

"That is as God wills," said Heritage.

He waited a moment; then added quietly, "Of course I had better go now. But first, if you don't mind, I have a message to give your father from Mrs. Salter. May I go down to the house with you?"

Peggy clutched his arm almost fiercely.

"You must not. My father is ill. Do you understand? He is ill. Oh, you are cruel to me."

"I seem to be everything I shouldn't be," said Heritage, with a momentary return to bitterness. "I promise you that I shall not worry your father. A few moments will suffice to deliver Mrs. Salter's message. Then I will go. Are you so eager then to put me out of your life that you grudge me these few last moments in your presence?"

"Very well," said Peggy, after a moment's silence. She turned wearily away. "I will try to find him for you. And first let me see him. He may be . . . asleep. If you will wait a little here . . . at the door? . . . "

Heritage heard her moving about the house. Once he heard her voice calling softly: "Daddy? Where are you? It is only Peggy." Presently she entered the sitting-room and a little pause ensued. Then came the sound of a stifled cry. Unable to contain himself any longer Heritage walked quickly inside.

Peggy was standing by the table. She looked up at the young man dully.

"My father is not here. He . . . some urgent business has called him away. I am to . . . go to Salter's until he returns."

"Of course," said Heritage. He was supremely conscious of the inanity the remark, but for the life of him could find nothing further to say. He seemed to be living in a night-

mare of unreality. His mind appeared unable to register further surprise. He told himself in a kind of desperation : " I shall wake up in a minute and find I've dreamt all this. Or else I'm going mad."

The girl was already making preparations for departure. Heritage, his mind a chaos of conflicting emotions, went softly through the house closing and bolting the windows and securing the doors. When he returned he found Peggy waiting for him on the verandah.

" I'll take you over to Salter's, of course," said Heritage gently. " You won't refuse me that much . . . Peggy ? "

She seemed to shiver and press still closer to him.

" I shall be glad if you would," she said in a low voice.

Left to itself the old house appeared to shrink still more deeply into the silence of the night. As the hours passed by, the myriad stars that twinkled overhead were blotted one by one behind the hurrying clouds that swept the skies in sullen flight from the approaching dawn. The darkness settled closer together. The uncanny hooting of an owl that flew witch-like over the hill, filled the night with distorted echoes.

Presently another sound arose. There came the whining slur of rusting hinges as the garden gate swung open to the touch of a dim figure that slunk animal-like from the black shadow of the timber. It circled silently about the house, testing the locked doors and windows with hands that shook in angry disappointment. The house lay inert against the wall of night ; silent, deserted ; robbed of that impalpable atmosphere which emanates from human occupancy. As if in understanding the crouching figure straightened itself suddenly with a muttered curse. As it had come, so it vanished—in slinking silence, treading ghoul-like upon the darkness, to melt swiftly away.

CHAPTER XIX

OLD Phil Adaire's sudden departure caused his friends some wonderment. If they had expected enlightenment from Peggy they found themselves quickly deceived. The girl said simply that her father had been called away upon a matter of urgent private business. More she appeared unable to tell them.

With this Adaire's friends were forced to content themselves. As it happened, they found little time for speculation of any kind. So strenuous was the nature of the task which confronted them that Adaire's absence was quickly overshadowed by problems more immediate and serious. Heritage, back in the bush once more, threw himself doggedly into his work, glad of anything that might serve to distract his mind from the bitterness that obscured it. At Salter's request he had written to the tramway authorities making forcible application for transport. Within a few days he received a reply stating that the matter would be looked into immediately. It was further promised that trucks would be consigned through to Salter as soon as they were available. The assurance given them appeared definite enough, and with it Salter professed himself satisfied. The stout man, true to his mercurial temperament, had recovered his spirits amazingly.

"I told you it was jess a bit of Samuel's dirt," he remarked to Pete, on receipt of the intelligence. "He'll mighty near lose his job over this; you see if he don't."

"I'm not worrying about that part of it, so long as the trucks come to hand when we want them," said the cattleman thoughtfully. "We've got to make delivery in a few weeks now, don't forget; or else pay a forfeit for each day short."

For a second Salter looked worried.

"I know. I'm kind of sorry Jack let us in for that part of it, but it's too late now. They say it's the usual thing,

anyhow. And I don't see any need to lose sleep just yet. Garraway can't hold us up for ever."

The days passed rapidly. At the yards the stave-stacks grew to huge proportions. Stung by a spasm of caution the stout man had made provision against possible interference here. George Judney and Sollum were now installed as watchmen in a hut erected on the yard boundary. Salter's instructions were fiercely definite.

"If one of Garraway's wasters set foot on our ground jess empty him off again with the sharp end of a stave," had said the stout man. "If he comes back, get to work on your bottle horn and we'll be'long before you can count your corns. But you'll find they'll leave us alone."

Back on the farm Mrs. Salter and the two girls found plenty to occupy themselves. Pete's kangaroo dog was now in Jean's care. The cattleman had decided to leave Pup at the farm for two reasons; first, because the animal would afford some protection to the women while the men-folk were away; and secondly, because Pup had been in some danger of hurt at the hands of Garraway's bushwhackers. These, only too anxious to display their spite, lost no opportunity to harass the big dog. Login's enmity was especially marked. Nor was Pup backward in retaliating to the limit of his opportunity. There was something almost human in the fierceness of his antipathy for the squat section boss.

Peggy Adaire had become strangely quiet and even dispirited. Jean Salter, watching her friend anxiously from day to day yet unable to guess at the cause of her despondency, became quickly alarmed.

"Peg, this won't do," she declared finally. "You stay indoors too much, and you're working too hard. I've a suspicion also that you're worrying about your father. Now I don't know anything about the matter that called him away; but you can be sure that he will remain absent no longer than he can possibly help. Did he give you no hint of what the business was?"

Peggy shook her head.

"I know no more than you. Only that he has gone."

"Well, you're not to worry, dear," said Jean again, a trifle helplessly. There seemed nothing more that she could say. With a wistful glance at her friend's averted face she returned to her work.

Late that afternoon Peggy wandered out by herself along the track leading to the tramline. Her head ached abomin-

ably and she longed for the cool breeze of evening. As yet the air was still and close. By the side of the track the gum bushes hung motionless, oppressed and lifeless in the spell of the heat. In a little while the girl sat down to rest in a little pool of shade. The sound of approaching feet made her glance up wearily. At sight of Tom Login coming towards her Peggy's eyes widened disgustedly.

The squat section boss was in his shirt sleeves. He carried his hat in his hand, fanning it against his heat-reddened face. At sight of the girl he halted abruptly.

"Evening, Miss Peggy. I'm kind of lucky finding you here. I was coming along to see you, anyway." Login sank his voice to a gruff whisper. There was a peculiar look in his wide-set eyes. "I brought you a message from your dad."

Peggy rose to her feet quickly. Her distrust of this man was momentarily submerged under the flood of thankfulness which poured into her heart at this evidence of her father's thought for her. "Oh, Mr. Login, where is he? Did he send you to me? Please tell me at once?"

So great was her relief that she never paused to consider the strangeness of her father's choice of a messenger. She only knew that here at last was the news she craved.

"Why, he's safe enough, I reckon," said Login slowly. "He ain't well though. That's what's the matter with him . . . he ain't over and above well. He thinks he'd get on better if you was to come and nurse him a spell. Only they's no one else to know about him. He was particklar to say that. You wasn't to go else."

"Where is he?" repeated the girl eagerly.

Login moistened his lips. He looked round carefully before replying.

"He's back there in the hut at Elbow Ridge. You'll go along then?"

"Yes—yes; of course," said Peggy impatiently. She felt a vague distress as she met Login's staring eyes. Her hands went to her throbbing temples. "Tell him I'm coming . . . at once. And thank you for . . . for letting me know. Say that I'm coming almost at once. I must go home first."

Scarcely noticing Login's muttered farewell she turned and walked slowly back along the track. At each step her head ached more fiercely. Of a sudden she began to be afraid that she was ill, too ill to make the trip to Elbow

Ridge. The thought added to her suffering. By the time she reached the house the pain in her head was so intense that she was almost blind.

When Jean Salter came into their bedroom a little later she found Peggy lying moaning on the bed.

"Peggy . . . Peggy!" she cried reproachfully. "Why didn't you tell us your head was so bad? Into bed with you this minute."

"Jean, I can't . . . I can't! Listen! daddy wants me. Do you hear? He sent a message to say he wants me to-night. He's ill. I *must* go. And yet—how can I? I can't see. My head . . . "

"You poor child," said Jean softly. She gently pushed the girl back on the pillows. "Of course you can't go. It would be madness. But I can go."

"You?"

"And why not, indeed? Of course I can go. Peggy Adaire, aren't we friends . . . the best ever? Can't you trust me to look after your father as if he were my very own? And do you think that I haven't known all this time that some dreadful trouble was on your mind? Let me share it. Or, if that is not possible, let me do what I may to help you. Tell me nothing, but do not refuse my friendship. Come, where is Mr. Adaire?"

"In the hut on Elbow Ridge," said Peggy instantly—as a tired child might yield to the tender insistence of its guardian. "Oh, Jean, will you tell him how I long to go to him. Perhaps he will have some message for me. I don't know. I don't seem to be able to think clearly. Jean, I was to go there alone. No one else must know where he is. You will promise me that?"

"Nobody shall know, dear," said Jean quietly. Her blue eyes clouded a little. "If only Pete were here to advise us . . . and yet not even Pete is to know anything of this. Now you're not to worry another mite. I am going to Elbow Ridge now. I know the way quite well, although I haven't been there for years. Now try to sleep; and in the morning you shall hear all kinds of good news."

"How good you are to me," whispered Peggy. For a moment the two girls clung together. Afterwards Peggy was to remember that moment as the most sacred in all their lives. "How good and dear you have always been."

When Jean entered the sitting room already clothed for her journey, Mrs. Salter looked up at her with troubled eyes.

"Jeannie, I can't help being worried about that poor child in there. I heard a little of what you said." The old lady clasped her hands nervously. Her quiet voice held a note of dread. "What's wrong with Peggy? What's wrong with all of us? Sometimes when I lay awake in the night thinking, I get almost frightened. I wish your father and the others had never meddled in this business. We ain't none of us happy like we used to be. There's things in all this that I don't understand. Where has Mr. Adaire gone to? And why has he gone? Why hasn't Peggy told us something? Jean, what's *wrong* with things?"

"I wish I knew," said Jean truthfully. She looked at her mother with a grave smile. "Listen dear; we can't force Peggy's confidence. Perhaps, in a little while, we shall understand things better. Only be sure of this, that nothing can really hurt any of us so long as we fight our troubles cleanly. I want to live . . . and keep on living. I don't think anyone on earth can love life more than I do. You know that. And yet it's so hard to guess at the future? What does it hold in store for any of us? God keep us unafraid."

"You're going out?" said the old lady.

"For Peggy," said Jean. "I may be late home, but that's not to worry you. Pup will be here to look after you, and I shall be quite safe."

It was night when Jean set out on her journey. Elbow Ridge was five miles from Salter's farm, but the girl had no fear that she might miss her way. The prospect of a lonely walk across the plains and gullies did not deter her in the least. Rather she revelled in the idea. The luminous sky, the fragrant odour of the bush (accentuated, as it seems to be by the dry heat of early night) filled her with delight. She looked up at the great white bosom of the moon as at some well-loved friend. By its widening light she was able to find her way unerringly towards the line of shadowed hills whereon lay the natural pathway known as Elbow Ridge.

By degrees the way sloped gently upwards. In a little while Jean found herself traversing a deep gully that dipped suddenly from the moon-blanched plains to rise again with almost startling abruptness towards the north. Darkness gushed from every side; but the vault of sky above, though yet fully illumined, showed deep blue and clear-cut with sapphire stars. On the crest of the hill rose the faintly discernible outline of the timber.

As Jean continued on the walls of the gully closed yet more swiftly about her. The night breeze sucking through the narrow compass of the ravine, swayed the gum bushes to and fro in spectral shadow across the moon-lit background of the cliff. Quite unexpectedly she found herself at the commencement of Elbow Ridge itself. Here a narrow ledge of rock wound upwards about the face of the gorge after the manner of a spiral staircase.

Arrived at the summit Jean stood a moment to recover her breath. In front of her, a light shining feebly from its one window, was the old prospector's hut to which it appeared Adaire had so unaccountably come. The extraordinary sequence of events to which Jean owed her presence there at such a time frankly puzzled her. What possible reason could Adaire have for choosing such a spot in which to live away from his friends? What was his business there? And even supposing the old man to be ill, why should he send for Peggy rather than make shift to return to his own home.

Just for a second Jean's sub-consciousness stirred uneasily. She was within an ace of yielding to the feeling of caution which swept over her. Then succeeded the recollection of her promise to Peggy, and she stepped forward resolutely and knocked on the closed door of the hut.

The silence was broken sharply by the scraping of a chair suddenly drawn back. An indistinct voice shouted at her to come in. She did so without hesitation, mechanically closing the door again behind her. In utter astonishment she found herself confronted by Login and Gus Rebner. Of old Phil Adaire there was no sign whatever.

In that first moment of entry Jean's senses seemed abnormally acute. She gained an impression of a wide, low-roofed interior with numberless bare poles stretched overhead from one wall-plate to another. The air was full of a musty penetrating odour which she was unable to define. In addition there was the sharp reek of raw spirit. This she recognised instantly, and her eyes flashed to the small pile of kegs at the end of the hut. Overhead, from one of the beams, swung a single oil lamp.

An uneasy pause was broken by Login. He was on his feet by the side of a greasy board table. On his flat face was a kind of angry disappointment.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded roughly.

For a single instant his gaze travelled to Rebner. The

latter also rose to his feet. Login turned again to Jean.

"Who told you to come here?"

Jean was conscious of a sudden tightening at her temples. By the thickness of Login's utterance she knew he had been drinking. She said as calmly as she was able:

"I came here to find Mr. Adaire. He sent a message saying that he was here—and ill. Peggy was unable to come. And so I came in her stead. Where is Mr. Adaire please?"

"So that's how it was?" said Login, ignoring the question. His eyes went over her slowly. "I reckon I always was unlucky. It ain't the first time I've set a dove-trap and caught a sparrow."

"I don't know what you mean," said Jean quickly. Almost for the first time in her life she felt the chill of fear. Never before had she seen Login like this. There was something abominable in his flushed face and staring eyes, the animal-like pose of his squat body and sprawling limbs. For the moment she was hardly aware of the presence of Rebner. She continued to meet Login's gaze as if fascinated. All the evil tales she had heard of this man came swiftly to mind.

"I don't know what you mean," she said again. "Will you tell me if Mr. Adaire is here? If not I must of course seek elsewhere."

"The old man's all right," said Login carelessly. A second time he appeared to exchange glances with Rebner. It seemed to Jean, watching uneasily, that his breathing quickened. "If you're here at all you must know a bit, eh? Phil Adaire don't wan't his name shouted all over the island. Move up closer and I'll tell you what you want to know. You don't know who might be listening, even in a place like this."

For a second Jean hesitated. Standing as she was directly in front of the door, she had but to turn the handle behind her to escape into the welcome blackness of the night without. Yet she could not bring herself seriously to believe that harm was intended. These men dare not harm her. And if Adaire were here she must know it. Could she face Peggy in the morning with the consciousness that her promise had gone unfulfilled because of a coward fear? The thought instantly steadied her. She took a step forward into the room—and then another.

Then indeed she recognised her mistake. She saw Login lean over the table, his face flaming to a sudden thought. Seized with panic she turned, but too late. Rebner had slipped between herself and the door.

Jean swung back again. Her lips had gone suddenly dry. The sound of her own voice, issuing thinly out of her throbbing throat, sounded in her ears like the far-away voice of a stranger.

"How dare you! Open that door at once!"

The protest brought no response save a low laugh from Login. He stepped round the end of the table and stood beside her, leering down at her indignant face.

"Pete's girl, eh?" he snapped his thumb and finger together. "*That* for Pete Diamond! I reckon I'll take a kiss from Pete's girl."

His gorilla-like arm caught her by the waist, pulling her shrinking body towards him. In swift desperation she hit at him, beating his flat face with her clenched fists. Login laughed and strained her face to his own. And suddenly—unrealisingly, the horror in Jean's brain crystallised into terrible action. She became primitive . . . atavistic . . . a woman fighting for her womanhood. Her teeth closed on the flesh of Login's cheek. With an oath of pain the man swung her away with such violence that she crashed back into the wall. She was round again in an instant, facing him with blanched face and widening eyes—aghast by what she had done.

"You damned little tiger-cat," said the section boss, with thick admiration. He made no attempt to follow her, but stood with his hand held to his torn cheek. Presently he turned to Rebner.

"The lady's kind of shy when they's company around. Maybe you'd like to take a walk, Gus?"

"Maybe I wouldn't," retorted Rebner unexpectedly. He met Login's angry eyes defiantly.

"See here," began Login; but ceased abruptly. Over his face came an expression of curious alertness. He nodded his head at the crouching girl.

"What's the matter with Pete's girl?"

Jean made no answer. Her head was strained forward in the attitude of listening. Her hands clasped and unclasped against her bosom.

And then Login, too, heard. For a second of time he stood as if petrified, his head held sideways to catch the indistinct

sound of a man's voice singing outside the hut. Then he sprang to the doorway and flattened his big body against the wall.

"Hell . . . Get the other side, Gus. Quick!"

Jean was erect, her eyes blazing. Her voice rang through the confined space in a passionate call:

"Pete . . . Oh! . . . Pete!"

On the instant, it seemed, the singing ceased. There followed a moment of absolute stillness, as if the man without were holding amazed interrogation of his sanity.

Once again the girl's voice rose in a shrill scream of warning—the jungle cry of mate to mate in the presence of a danger too terrible to endure.

"Pete . . . the door! Be careful of the door, Pete!"

Upon the last throbbing echoes of the words came the impact of a heavy body hurled against the lower panel of the door. Through the splintered boards shot Pete Diamond, his hands raised to ward off the danger he sensed but could not yet see. So tremendous was the entry that the men crouched on either side were taken unawares. Login's long arms, raised murderously, came down a thought too late. The head of the charging cattleman caught him just above the thigh and the three men went to the floor in a fury of threshing limbs. With an effort Pete freed himself and stood upright. His right fist, swung blindly as he rose, caught Rebner on the angle of the jaw. The man went down again and lay quivering. At the same instant Login's hands gripped Pete by the neck. Locked breast to breast the two men reeled across the hut.

Into the brain of the cattleman came a curious buzzing. The terrible grip of those simian hands on his throat seemed to tighten with each second. Tiny specks of light came in front of his eyes, and his chest seemed on the point of bursting. Desperately he pushed his free arm upwards between the curved wrists of his opponent. The flat of his hand took Login under the base of the chin, forcing his head back on his shoulders. With savage joy Pete felt the grating of the neck bones as he pushed upwards with all his force. Login's clutching hands loosened for an instant in a spasm of agony and next instant they collided with the board table, tossing it this way and that, smashing it literally to fragments beneath their writhing bodies.

The jar of impact as they went down tore loose Login's hold. They rose together, the hands of each going out for a

fresh strangle grip. In that single moment as he came upright Pete caught his first glimpse of the girl whose presence in that place constituted the greatest of all the problems that beat upon his mind. At sight of her white face and terrified eyes there settled upon him a cold, merciless desire, a kind of abnormal longing to still for ever the abominable activities of this man before him. Massing his strength for the effort Pete drove his first into Login's snarling face with all the weight of his body behind the blow. He saw Login wince ; heard his animal-like grunt as the blow went home. Again and again he struck. His quick caution forgotten, he began to press forward. In that instant Login resorted to a trick. He dropped to his knees suddenly. His long arms, reaching out, caught Pete below the knees and swept him crashing to the floor. By a sheer miracle the cattleman fell sideways, his head just missing a jagged splinter of the broken table.

Pete got to his feet tottering, a red mist swirling about his head. He could not see ; but his hands, reaching out instinctively, encountered the thick flesh of his enemy's neck. In a flash Pete's fingers dug themselves in, the last ounce of his strength settling to the grip that had been used for his own undoing. Already exhausted Login could offer but poor resistance. The end came with almost startling suddenness. Login's face went purple, his eyes protruded ; the threshing of his limbs weakened. He sagged downwards to the floor in a grotesque heap.

Automatically the tension of Pete's fingers released. Yet as he crouched exhausted beside his beaten enemy there came into his brain a tiny thread of sound—insistent and terrible. Desperately he essayed understanding. And all at once he thrilled to consciousness of a new fear. As if from immeasurable distance came Jean Salter's voice, screaming at him :

" Pete . . . behind you. Look ! behind you . . . Oh, quick ! "

By a tremendous effort he turned his head . . . and stayed thus, in a paralysis of inaction. Strive as he might his dulled senses would not respond to rouse his body to movement. He lay inert, a deathly sickness at his soul. Within a yard of him a naked blade in his hand—crawled Gus Rebner. The man's face was horrible, a mere mask of blood where the stamping heels of the fighting men had trampled him as he lay. He rose unsteadily to his feet and lifted his knife for the blow. Utterly helpless Pete closed

his eyes. And then came suddenly a dull thud and the sound as of glass splintering on the floor beside him. When next he opened his eyes it was to find Jean's hair sweeping his face, to feel her hands tugging at him in an agony of impatience.

"Pete . . . have they hurt you? Quick, boy. We must go, Login is coming round."

The cattleman rose groggily to his feet.

"Jeannie, why did you stay? Why didn't you get clear while you had the chance? Tack's tied up jess outside. You should have taken him and lit out for home. Lord! . . . who did that to Gus Rebner?"

Jean shuddered as her eyes fell on the crumpled body at their feet.

"I did. I had to. In another moment he would have killed you. I saw it in his eyes. He was mad. Before I knew what I was doing I had picked up a bottle and hit him on the head. It was horrible. Boy . . . is he hurt? Is he dead?"

Pete's strength was rapidly returning. He knelt a moment by the side of Rebner.

"Dead? Not he! He's got a skull like a bullock." Of a sudden his face darkened with fresh rage. His black eyes snapped. "Jeannie, I ain't heard yet what brought you here. They's been some trickery somewhere. I'm going to find out. I'm going to choke the truth out of Login. And if they've hurt even a hair of your head I'm going to kill the two of them."

He swung round, but Jean caught his arm.

"Don't, Pete. They never harmed me. See . . . you came in time. It was Peggy they meant to trick. They sent word to her that her father was here—and ill. She was ill herself. She couldn't come. Thank God for that! And so I came. And they wouldn't let me go."

For a brief second she clung to him passionately.

"Oh, Pete! Thank God you came when you did. Quick! let us leave this place. I never want to see it again."

Outside the hut the moonlight flooded the ridge in a tide of silver radiance. As Pete helped Jean into the saddle he looked up at her adoringly.

"It was you that saved us both, Jeannie . . . Jeannie; first my soul, and now my body. God's angels couldn't do more. But that's what you are. Just one of God's angels."

Jean laughed unsteadily.

"Silly boy. Could an angel be afraid? And I was abominably—terrifyingly afraid. See how I tremble yet."

"You haven't even asked me how I came to be here on The Ridge," said Pete. "You must know now what that place is."

"I do. Those bottles and barrels can mean only one thing. It's from here the tramline gets its sly grog. It is Login and Rebner that supply the men with drink."

"And what about me?" asked Pete slowly.

"You?" exclaimed Jean. "Why, do you think I could for one minute connect you with such a vile business? You had nothing to do with that part of it."

Pete looked back at her proudly.

"Good girl! You're as right as right can be. Jeannie, that hut was where we stored and packed our skins. This other thing was run between those two back there and Hennessy. I've known about it, of course; but that's all. I came back to-night to see they was none of my traps left around. I thought they was no one there. Well, now I'm quit of all of them. The season's done. I ain't skin-running any more. They's no need now for you to worry. I'm keeping my two hands clean and watching out for that dream farm of ours. Jeannie . . . I give you warning I ain't going to wait much longer."

He stepped closer to the side of the moving horse, one hand resting on the pommel of the saddle. In silence they began to descend the gully slope.

CHAPTER XX

IN the sultry shelter of a tent pitched to one corner of the stack-yard Heritage was making a final check of the contents of the stacks. The result of his calculations more than satisfied him. Taking into account the material still waiting haulage from the stump, his figures showed that they had close on 75,000 first quality staves waiting transport over the Government line.

Having determined this much Heritage rose to his feet with a yawn. As a result of dry weather attended by a succession of easterly winds, he was feeling enervated and even irritable. Lighting his pipe he presently reseated himself, shoving his chair back so that his gaze wandered out across the yards to the funnel of open country which ran between the two lines of green scrub converging on the north bank of Bat River. The river itself was not in sight, yet Heritage could easily trace its course from the deeper colouring and lower elevation of the paper-bark swamps that hugged the running water. Beyond these a gap in the tall timber carried the view uninterruptedly to the line of hills which showed indistinctly through the haze which wrapt the highlands. Immediately to the left showed the high serrated summit of Elbow Ridge.

Thought of the place made Heritage frown uneasily. Pete had told him a little of what had occurred that night he found Jean on Elbow Ridge, and Heritage was still trying to reconcile the happening with his preconceived notions of existing conditions. Used though he was becoming to the lawlessness of a section of the community dwelling on The Bend, the affair at Elbow Ridge filled him with a sort of angry amazement. In his heart was a great thankfulness that Peggy Adaire had escaped an experience which must have terrified her beyond expression ; might, indeed, have wrought lasting evil upon her. Jean Salter, despite her almost masculine courage, had been shocked to the verge of illness for days following the experience.

From this thought it was a natural transition to the mystery of Adaire's disappearance. Heritage was unable any longer to resist the impression that the old man was in some way connected with Barkley, the man he had come to find; if, indeed, he were not Barkley himself. Yet what reason could Adaire have for thus consistently hiding his identity. Failure to answer this question in his own mind was the one thing that constrained Heritage to silence. Short of a bald accusation there was nothing he could do to arrive at the truth; unless, by a miracle, he might discover the author of the note pinned to his tent on the night of Adaire's departure.

Heritage felt in his pockets and presently found Colvin's latest letter. This he re-read carefully. Among other things the old lawyer informed him of an intention to advertise immediately for news of Barkley.

"You've had a fair trial as an amateur sleuth," wrote Colvin satirically. "You may be progressing well enough in this timber business (indeed, I hope so), but as regards the discovery of Peter Philip Barkley you appear to be exactly where you were on the day you sailed from Melbourne with a copy of *Sherlock Holmes* in your bag. I think your reticence has been the chief mistake. Country folk are prone to unreasonable suspicions. Had you been less mysterious concerning the exact nature of your mission, by this time you would in all probability have something definite to tell me. I consider the time ripe for a little publicity of the right kind."

Heritage had an uncomfortable feeling that his friend's good-humoured censure was partly justified. He was not sorry that Colvin had decided to take a hand in the matter. Timber Bend should have its curiosity satisfied at last. Heritage reflected comfortably that he would get in ahead of Colvin there, at any rate. He was due at Salter's for dinner at mid-day. He decided to take his friends fully into his confidence without further delay.

As he passed by the watchman's hut on his way to the plains Sollum called to him from the doorway.

"Did you hear they's been a man sawn up along over at Frame's mill?" inquired the little man shrilly. "He got caught in the belting somehow. They've sent down for the doctor from Sun Port."

"Who was it?" asked Heritage, with a sudden sickening in his stomach.

Sollum shook his head.

" I ain't heard. George jess told me that much tidying up before he left for Salter's. He sort of promised Charley he'd see to the harness and things now and again. He'll be staying overnight where he is."

" Who will ? George, you mean ? "

" Charley Salter. If you're going along to the farm you might let the folks know that Pete and the Boss have gone along to find a winter track out from the lagoons."

" All right," said Heritage, stepping out on his journey. The mention of Pete Diamond just then brought him a feeling of depression. Heritage had a warm regard for the cattleman ; the thought that others were not so favourably disposed troubled him a good deal. By now he had learnt something of Pete's past history. He knew that, as Sollum had once expressed it, " Pete's in wrong with the police. They got their claws into him. And he's mighty foolish mixing himself with folks like Login and Rebner on a side deal. They'll go back on him sure as eggs is eggs. I reckon they're jess waiting the chance to play him dirt. And then, by gosh, won't they come a healthy old mix-up. Fancy Pete being made to do time."

But this was just what Heritage could not do. His imagination fell short of such a contingency. Pete . . . with his big heart and boyish recklessness . . . to go to gaol ? The very idea was an absurdity. Pete would never stand it. Confinement would send him mad. Love for the open country over which he roamed at will was part of the big fellow's religion. The scalloped plains ; the wide sweep of booming coastlands ; the steep of wind-swept knoll and twisting gully ridge ; the warm shelter of turf-lined pockets deep down in the tea-tree and honeysuckle bush : these were his playground, his chosen home. To take him from them, to shut him out of sight within four walls beyond reach or comfort of the outback where he belonged, would be to goad him to renunciation of that new life wherein his highest hopes dwelt.

Heritage's training as a lawyer had made him something of a psychologist. In vague fashion he was able to comprehend that Pete would never submit to imprisonment. The cattleman was, in fact, a rough symbol of the proud freedom of that sky-swept land whose green comeliness and magical endurance had won his heart. In spite of the element of lawlessness in his make-up Pete was warm-hearted, staunch,

and intensely likeable. That he might be led by reckless anger or unforeseen circumstance to denial of his present sober happiness was an ever present fear amongst his friends.

Heritage found Jean Salter and Peggy busy with their needles in the shade of the front verandah. He sat down on the floor with his back to the wall of the house, exclaiming thankfully at having found shelter at last from the muggy heat of the open.

" Mr. Jack Heritage, you make an admirable courier. The most important qualification for the position of postman is the faculty of appearing immediately when called for. Peggy and I were just complaining that we had heard nothing of our joint affairs for ever so long. And now, hey presto ! here you are."

" What's left of me," rejoined Heritage, mopping his face vigorously. He stole a quick glance at Peggy, wondering a little wistfully at the thinness of her face. Since the night of Adaire's departure they had met more than once, but by tacit consent avoided any reference to what had passed between them. Outwardly, at all events, their relations were as formerly.

" And your mail-bag ? " persisted Jean.

" Why, I believe there's nothing much in it after all. The stackyard is full to overflowing. On the whole, things are booming. Of course, we haven't secured our trucks yet ; but we expect to shortly. By the way, there has been an accident at Garraway's mill. One of his men got in the way of the breaking down saw. I don't know any of the particulars."

" Oh, the poor fellow," exclaimed the girls in chorus.

" Who was he ? " added Jean quickly.

Heritage shook his head.

" I don't know. My information came from Sollum. He asked me to let you know that your father will not be returning here until to-morrow. In all probability he and Pete will camp at the yards. Even if one or both decide to come on here after all, it is bound to be very late before they get in. They went to pick a track out from the lagoons. We shall have to lay about a mile of corduroy and brush before we get anything like a passable track over that country."

" You expect to be very busy then ? " asked Peggy quietly.

" Tremendously," asserted the young man. He hesitated a little. " Any news yet of Mr. Adaire ? "

" Not yet. He . . . I think perhaps his business is

taking much longer than he thought. Of course he will be coming home any day now."

"To be sure he will," said Heritage, affecting a heartiness he was far from feeling. To ease the quick ache at his heart he began to talk flippantly of his letter from Colvin.

"I come to claim your sympathy. I've been turned out of my job. Colvin—that's my partner—has decided that my ability as a sleuth-hound is much over-rated. He complains ridiculously about my failure to produce results; quite forgetting the circumstances of the matter. In short, since Barkley is not forthcoming, Colvin proposes to invoke the aid of the newspapers."

"His advertisement will need to give more detail than we have had so far, if it is to be of any use," suggested Jean, with a touch of malice.

Heritage laughed.

"I'll try to make amends now. If I was a bit close over the exact nature of our business with friend Barkley, it was only because I did not want my time wasted with bogus claimants. Be it known then that Barkley is the fortunate inheritor of something like £500,000. There now! the cat is out of the bag. An old chap named Captain Moyes, who died about six months ago, is the donor."

Heritage was looking at Jean as he spoke, watching in idle admiration the dextrous movement of her slim fingers as they plied the needle about the piece of fancy work on her lap. Peggy's quick gasp of surprise, the movement of her hands to her breast, escaped him. "And this is the man that declared he had no news for us!" exclaimed Jean. "£500,000? My goodness, is there so much money in Australia? Barkley is a lucky man." For a moment she was silent. "And yet is he? Money isn't everything. And if Barkley is alive he must be an old, old man, surely. He mightn't care now for money or money's worth. But supposing he is dead? Or supposing you are unable to trace him?"

"In the first case his heirs (if there are any) will benefit. If we are unable to trace him at all the money goes to various charities."

"A very sensible arrangement," said Jean approvingly. "Peg, what do you think?"

"I quite agree," said Peggy in a low voice. For a fleeting instant her grey eyes met Heritage's almost appealingly; then she bent more closely over her work. "I . . . think

that would be the best use after all for such a lot of money. So many poor people would be glad of help."

"Do you think the courts might be induced to consider your humble servant as coming within the category?" asked Heritage hopefully.

"Scarcely," said Jean, her eyes twinkling. "Besides, you know perfectly well that you don't need the money. A fortunate investment in timber has disqualified you."

Heritage grinned and went off to hunt up George Judney. He spent most of the afternoon enjoying the quaint conversation of the lank hut-keeper, and attempting to digest incredible stories anent the redoubtable Bill Hardie.

Long afterwards, when Heritage was able to look back calmly upon the events of that day, he marvelled to remember that his quiet enjoyment of the moment had been unspoilt by any premonition of evil. Save for the shadow clouding his relations with Peggy Adaire, his spirits went unchecked. He felt no warning of those happenings which were so soon to place a lasting mark upon the lives of them all.

Night fell with the air still hot and sultry. The wind, however, was beginning to rise in the tops of the timber. It came at irregular intervals, promising eventually to settle into a steady gale. Back on the verandah once more, in company of the two girls and Judney, Heritage sniffed the air in vain attempt to discover a hint of rain. As his eyes wandered out across the barely seen vista of plain before them he presently became aware of a white-clad figure advancing from the direction of the tramline. He called the attention of the others.

"Someone is coming. Mr. Salter, I suppose; or Pete."

Jean was on her feet peering into the dusk.

"It's neither. It's a woman. Why, I do believe it's Sadie Williams." She called softly: "Is it you, Sadie? We haven't seen you for ages. Bad girl to desert your friends."

Sadie halted in the black shadow of the bushes by the verandah. Her voice came hesitatingly.

"I ain't deserted you, Jean. I . . . you know we been pretty busy this last week or two. I thought I'd jess look in and see you all on my way back home from the line. No, I won't go inside. I reckon if you don't mind I'll jess set awhile here on the boards and rest myself."

Judney's rumbling tones broke in with a question.

"Been down at the mill, Sadie? Who was the man that got hurt? How's he making out?"

"I think he was a new hand. His name was Sam Matthews," said the red-haired girl. "My, the poor fellow's pretty chopped up, they say. The doctor was jess come up the line as I left. He'll have to camp the night there, I reckon."

There fell a little silence. Heritage lay back in his chair, his eyes fixed dreamily on the red glow of Judney's pipe. Opposite him showed faintly the white dresses of the three girls.

"I heard to-day that Frame was coming across," said Sadie abruptly.

Heritage sat upright, his sleepiness forgotten.

"Is he, by Jingo! Who told you that, Miss Williams?"

"Login did. They were talking about it at the mill. Tom said Mr. Frame was angry about something."

The girl's tones betrayed no embarrassment. It was plain she knew nothing of the affair at Elbow Ridge.

Under cover of the dark Jean gave a little shudder of disgust. She asked quickly:

"You don't know, of course, just when Frame is expected?"

"They never said," replied Sadie indifferently.

A second time silence fell upon the little group. Presently Sadie rose to her feet with a sigh.

"I'll be getting along home. I . . . jess called in to see you again. It gets kind of lonely down there at the Ferry. Dad ain't no company."

Peggy began to protest.

"Why, you've only just come. Jean, try and persuade her to stop and have some supper."

"But I ain't a mite hungry," said the red-haired girl indistinctly. She seemed to peer at them through the gloom. Into her voice crept a wistful note. "We're friends, Jeannie, ain't we? You don't mind me dropping in like this to see you? I ain't any girls to talk to but only you and Peggy."

"Goodness me, child; what a thing to ask," exclaimed Jean wonderingly. The strangeness of the question troubled her. "Why, we're the best of friends, and always shall be. How absurd of you."

She stood up and patted her dress into shape.

"I feel that a walk will do me good. I'm going with you part of your way home. George will come and look after

us. And Peggy and Mr. Heritage can stop with mother. Now you two, see that you don't quarrel while we're away. Sadie, don't try to stop me. I tell you my mind is made up."

At the gate Judney asked: "What way was you going home, Sadie?"

"Round by Berrigan's Gum," said the girl slowly.

The hut-keeper lifted his eyes to the dark mass of the timber looming ahead. "Why that way?"

"Because it's shorter, and I reckon I'm tired," answered Sadie, almost irritably.

"Well, I suppose it don't matter," grumbled Judney; but his voice was a little anxious. The wind was rising steadily. From the depths of a gully on their right came the hollow boom of a snapping tree trunk and the quick echo of falling limbs. "Once you get round the head of Grey Lagoon they ain't much big timber to speak of. I'd watch out, all the same. This wind's pretty high."

"I ain't frightened," said Sadie simply.

Abreast of the Lagoon she halted suddenly.

"Jean, you ain't to come any further. I shall be quite all right now. Three miles of a walk ain't anything to me."

"We'll keep on as far as Berrigan's Gum," declared Jean. She went to move on but Sadie caught her by the arm.

"No," said the girl sharply. Almost at once she stepped back as if confused. "Jeannie, I didn't mean to speak rude. Only you ain't to come any further. I . . . I'd sooner you didn't. I can find my way first-rate."

"Well, of all the unsociable creatures," laughed Jean. She bent her face coaxingly towards Sadie. "Now, dear, don't be cross. To-night I'm in one of my obstinate moods. We simply can't leave you until we see you clear of the timber."

The red-haired girl was obdurate.

"Please, Jeannie. I'd sooner you didn't. And anyhow it don't seem right to drag you all this way. You must be tired already."

"Tired? Why, I never felt more energetic in my life. It's you that must be tired. You seem to have been tramping all day. What a shame. Why doesn't your father buy you a horse, Sadie?"

She put a hand on Sadie's shoulder and kissed her quickly.

"Let me have my own way this time, dear. Me tired? Come now and I'll show you. I'll race both of you to the

big tree. I feel so wide awake to-night that I don't think even Pete could catch me. One, two, three—off."

Not waiting a reply she darted down the track. For a second the sound of her flying feet came faintly back to them through the star-lit night, and then died away in the slough of the wind.

Judney looked at the girl beside him.

"She's a lively one, eh Sadie? She sort of reminds me of a young doe kangaroo, the way she goes tearing through the bush. I never knew her to be in better spirits. Maybe it's because Pete and the dog are coming in from the bush for a spell. She ain't seen Pete for more'n a week."

Sadie made no answer. Jean's sudden departure seemed to have taken her by surprise. She seemed to be breathing a little hard and her footsteps had quickened.

Judney touched her on the arm.

"What's wrong, Sadie? You ain't vexed with Jean, are you? She didn't mean nothing by it. She's jess chockful of happiness to-night. We'll find her waiting for us somewhere ahead."

He broke off suddenly to exclaim "What was that?"

Following a short lull in the wind had come three or four quick sounds not unlike the tapping of an axe on hollow wood. The hut-keeper paused in his stride.

"Maybe it was a root snapping. And yet it wasn't exactly like that. It's blowing pretty hard, ain't it? There it comes again."

This time their ears caught but a single sharp note. Scarcely had the sound of it died away than there burst upon their hearing a succession of loud cracks followed instantly by a slurring whine that rose swiftly to a cataclysm of sound.

Judney gripped Sadie by the elbow.

"God! . . . Berrigan's Gum! The damned old tree is falling. Jeannie . . ."

His voice was lost in the harsh crash of the falling timber. For a minute the air was rent by a fury of discordant noise as the big tree, gathering momentum as it went, tore its way through a forest of branching limbs. It's huge girth struck the ground with a concussion that jarred the very earth under their feet. There followed a rain of splinters, and then silence.

George Judney was already running down the track. He was shouting as he went. After him laboured Sadie Williams,

her hands clutching at her breast. As she stumbled onwards she began to call over and over again in a frightened whisper like the pitiful whimpering of a child :

" Jeannie . . . Jeannie . . . Jeannie."

There came to her straining ears no sound but the rush of wind overhead. The black shadow of the timber seemed to engulf her, sinking her yet deeper in the ocean of her fear. And then suddenly she stopped. On the track before her knelt Judney, his arms about a still figure in white. About them stretched a litter of fallen limbs, with jagged ends that stabbed the darkness, within a foot of their bodies.

Sadie put a shaking hand on the hut-keeper's shoulder. For a moment she could not articulate.

" Jeannie's hurt. George . . . she ain't . . . agoing to . . . die ? "

" God knows," said Judney hoarsely. He rose to his feet, the girl's limp body in his arms. " They was a limb crushing her chest. She's breathing, but . . . Sadie, take her feet. We must get her home. Thank God they's the doctor down at the mill. We must find him right away—him and . . . Pete."

The red-haired girl seemed sunken in a stupor of grief. Only as they went carefully up the track with their burden, her eyes seemed to search the darkness on either side almost as if she were expecting someone to emerge suddenly to their aid.

Heritage was never to forget the horror of that night. He was chatting to Mrs. Salter and Peggy in the kitchen, when the door opened and Jean was carried in by a white-faced man and woman and laid gently down on the couch. Only when the unconscious girl had been taken to her own room and the agonised mother settled to watch by the bedside, did Heritage find time to realise the extent of his own grief.

Judney had gone off again immediately to fetch the doctor. Heritage, having done what little he could to render assistance, returned to the kitchen to wait Judney's return. With Peggy Adaire sobbing quietly beside him he sat in silence, his consciousness aghast at the calamity which had befallen them. At the opposite end of the room Sadie Williams was huddled on the sofa, her hands to her face. She sat there stupidly ; uttering no word.

The clock on the dresser ticked on slowly, each moment seeming an eternity of time. From Jean's room came no sound. The house appeared sunken in a kind of despairing

silence. Once Heritage rose and tip-toed to the back door, where he looked anxiously into the night. But no sound of voices reached his ears. He heard only the slam of the wind and the far-off booming of the sea.

He was about to rise for the second time when Peggy touched his hand.

"Pete!" she whispered.

Even as she spoke came the thud of feet on the verandah boards. The door swung inwards to reveal the cattleman. The big fellow began to speak immediately.

"I thought that job would keep me for ever. It was so late when we got to the yards that Charley reckoned to camp there and come on in the morning. Well, Jack; what's the news? I reckon . . . "

He broke off, his eyes travelling round the room. On the sofa Sadie had not moved; only, at the sound of Pete's voice, a little shudder seemed to move her body. The tears were streaming down Peggy's face. Heritage had risen to his feet. His mouth had gone suddenly dry.

Pete looked directly at him.

"They's something wrong," said the cattleman slowly. All at once an expression of almost terror leapt into his eyes. He took a step forward into the room.

"Where's Jean?" he asked stridently.

For all his vast pity Heritage could not bring himself to meet his friend's look. He began to stammer.

"Pete . . . Pete . . . "

In a single stride the big fellow reached him. He took Heritage by the shoulders in a grip that hurt. His black eyes were blazing.

"Where is she? What have you done to her? God Almighty, will none of you speak?"

He shook Heritage till the young man's teeth rattled. Almost choking he gasped out:

"Pete . . . old man; don't. Jean's hurt. Berrigan's Gum came down and she was struck on the chest by a limb. George has gone to Garraway's mill for the doctor. Jean is in her room there with her mother. Pete . . . for God's sake don't look like that!"

Without a word Pete released his hold. As in a dream Heritage saw him reach for the handle of Jean's door. They heard his heavy tread across the floor and the broken murmur of Mrs. Salter's voice. And then silence once more.

While Heritage waited, his arm about Peggy's bent shoul-

ders, there rose upon the quiet of the house such a cry of agony as the young man prayed he might never again hear from human lips. In a panic lest it should be repeated he drew Peggy gently to her feet.

"Peggy . . . come away . . . anywhere into the open. We can do nothing—we can know nothing until the doctor comes. Let's keep on hoping. Good God, what a tragedy!"

He paused at the door to look back inquiringly at Sadie, but the girl looked up and shook her head. She continued upon the sofa, half lying and half sitting; her large-knuckled hands pressed to her eyes. In that attitude she remained until the return of George Judney and the doctor.

The latter was a man nearing middle age; tall and stooping with little clusters of greying curls at the temples of his thin, high-cheeked face. The corners of his clean-shaven mouth drooped slightly. He seemed infinitely weary.

Judney pointed to Jean's room.

"Go right in, doctor. I reckon they're expecting you. If . . . if they's anything I can do, you'll tell me."

Pete made no sign as the doctor quietly entered the room. The cattleman sat motionless by the side of the bed, his eyes riveted on the china-white face of the injured girl. With each feeble intake of her breath his body appeared to flinch in a sort of mechanical repetition, pitiful to see. Generous to a fault in all things else, concerning Jean Salter the big fellow was self-centred to an extraordinary degree. In the queer workings of his mind he had come to believe that this girl meant infinitely more to him than a relationship dependent upon sex alone. She was the living expression of the sum of all human benevolence he had ever known; the manifestation of every clean and beautiful thought he had ever pondered. He seemed now to be oblivious of anything but the horror of the moment. He cringed like a man afraid; as one might who sees his own soul slipping into outer darkness, and himself powerless to save. When Mrs. Salter touched him he looked up at her vacantly.

"Pete, the doctor's here," whispered the poor woman. By the faint light of the candle, burning on the dressing-table beside her, she appeared astonishingly calm and resolute. Long since she had schooled herself to believe that hope for Jean there was none. There is a degree of suffering which, with some natures, defeats itself by its very intensity; inducing, as it were, a kind of mental anæsthesia. So it

was with Mrs. Salter. At that moment her senses were numbed. The time was yet to come when her brave old heart would know to the full of its anguish.

The doctor was already bending over Jean. He went about his work in silence. When finally he desisted he looked up to meet Mrs. Salter's eyes.

"Well?" asked the old lady collectedly.

With his hands the doctor made a slight gesture of helplessness. These people here were strangers to him. Until that night he had never even heard of them; it was probable that when he went away he would meet them no more. But he would have been less than human had his feelings not responded in some measure to the tragedy of what was taking place.

"What can I say? It's useless to attempt to deceive you. And a lie could do no good any way. It may seem cruel, but in matters of this sort it is surely best to face the truth. I am more sorry than I can tell you, but . . . I can hold out no hope. Even if it were possible to operate the chance of recovery could only be one in a thousand. As it is . . ?"

The silence was broken by Pete. He stood upright, facing the doctor across the bed. In his haggard face was so great an expression of suffering that the doctor's heart contracted in unaccustomed pity.

"Do you mean that Jeannie is going to . . . die?" the cattleman whispered.

The doctor nodded—not trusting himself to speak. He looked down at Jean regretfully, wondering at the strange peacefulness of the white face.

At that moment Pete's hand shot out and caught his wrist in a grip of iron. The big fellow's face blazed with the madness of utter despair. He pulled the doctor towards him so that their heads almost touched over the still form on the bed between them.

"You liar . . . Oh, you damned liar!" he cried tensely. "Jeannie to die? You don't know what you're saying. A thing like that ain't possible. God would never let her die."

For a second he seemed on the point of choking. His mouth twisted in agony. He raised his free hand with a threatening gesture.

"And you? Damn you, what good are you? To stand there and say a thing like that? Ain't they nothing you can do? Why . . . why . . . if Jeannie dies

by God, so shall you! Do you hear that? I'll strangle you with my two hands!"

The doctor was no coward. Also he had an unusual understanding of human nature. His tired eyes met those of the madman steadily enough.

"My friend, do so by all means, if it will bring her back to life. But you know that it can't. God knows there is nothing I would not do to save this poor girl for those that love her."

He waited a moment; then added quietly: "You are hurting my arm."

The appeal passed unnoticed. Pete was whispering as if to himself, "It ain't possible . . . it ain't possible. Jeannie to die? To leave me here . . . ?"

"Please let go my wrist," said the doctor once more. He spoke softly, as one speaks to a fractious child.

This time the cattleman obeyed. Of a sudden he seemed to get a grip of his sanity. The fury faded from his eyes; his body ceased its shaking.

"God help you all," said the doctor abruptly.

"They ain't any God," said Pete. He put his hands to his temples. "If Jean dies then they ain't any God. If they was do you think He could do a thing like this? To take her away from me . . . without a sign, without even a word to help keep me back from the hell I'm going to. No, they ain't a God any more!"

He dropped on his knees by the bed. Like those of a blind man his hands groped their way over the pillows until they found the thick mass of the dying girl's hair, twining it about his fingers, fondling the tawny curls in an ecstasy of grief.

"Jeannie . . . Jeannie . . . ain't you even going to say good-bye?"

Afterwards the doctor could never quite explain to himself the wonder of what followed. In his heart he believed that the girl was already far beyond the reach of any earthly appeal. Yet at sound of that anguished cry her eyelids quivered suddenly. As if the despairing tones of Pete's voice had power to cleave the mists of death and call the fleeting spirit back to earth, Jean's bosom rose in a long sighing breath. Her eyes opened and rested for a brief instant upon the graven face of the man who called her name brokenly. A smile—fleeting, transient, flickered on her mouth. By a supreme effort she moved her hands feebly

upwards, as if trying to convey some last message which it was beyond power of her lips to frame.

To Pete the action translated itself instantly. How many times, in all the glory of her trusting, buoyant youth, had those fluttering hands prefaced her never wearied cry: "Clean hands, Boy; always clean hands. Pete, promise me!"

He buried his face on the pillows.

With a hesitating glance at Mrs. Salter, who sat dry-eyed and still, the doctor went softly from the room. For a moment he leant against the kitchen mantelpiece, his head on his arms. George Judney's voice recalled him to himself.

"Doc, I can see it ain't any good hoping. Am I right?"

The doctor nodded silently.

"See now, how queer the Almighty seems to do things," said the old hut-keeper huskily, after a little silence. "If it was me now, or one of the other folks, that was took, I reckon nobody should have bothered much. I'm old. I've had my time. And maybe life ain't so hard to leave, after all, when they's none of your own left behind to grieve. But Jean . . .?"

The doctor was not listening. He appeared aware for the first time of the presence of Sadie Williams. Now he was looking at her intently. The red-haired girl had slipped to the floor. She began to moan softly.

Something in her attitude roused the doctor's professional instinct. He moved quickly to the girl's side, but turned back to Judney almost instantly. In his voice was a sort of tired amazement.

"Good God! . . . what's this! Where is this woman's husband?"

Judney looked at him in blank surprise.

"Her what?"

"I asked you where this girl's husband was. He should be sent for."

Judney plucked at his beard with a shaking hand.

"Why, I reckon she ain't got any husband," he said slowly. "That's . . . jess Sadie Williams."

The eyes of the two men met in a long look.

"Help me lift her to a bed somewhere," said the doctor, wearily. "And then call that old lady yonder. There's work here for all of us, and maybe it will help to take her mind away from her own grief for a little time."

In stupified silence the hut-keeper complied.

CHAPTER XXI

FOLLOWING the inquest and the final laying to rest of Jean Salter in the tiny cemetery at the head of Grey Lagoon, work at Salter's camp became temporarily disorganised. Of those concerned Salter himself seemed, for a time, least capable of recovering his balance. The stout man wandered aimlessly about his farm ; his cheeks strangely shrunken, and his manner absent and hesitating. When spoken to he replied in monosyllables, seeming to shun companionship of any kind. By degrees, however, the mood passed. One day he made his appearance at the camp where Heritage was doing his best to direct operations during the absence of both his partners, and astonished the young man by taking hold again as if nothing had happened.

Of Pete's whereabouts Heritage could only guess. The cattleman had disappeared early upon the morning of Jean Salter's death. With his dog loping beside him he rode away across the grey plains that stretched to meet the dawn ; nor had there been a man there with courage enough to question his going. A little later the doctor,too, had departed, leaving the house in sombre silence save for the quiet feet of the two women who tended Sadie Williams. Heritage and Judney had gone to find Charley Salter.

A week after the inquest Heritage received a curt note from the railway management to the effect that trucks were at last available. Under normal conditions Salter would have greeted the news with childish jubilation. Now he was almost apathetic.

" We'll go right ahead and lick Frame and Garraway, anyhow," he said. " After that . . . well, I ain't caring too much what turns up. You know, Jack, I'd like things to turn up trumps jess for you and the Adaires. I reckon the rest of us can dodge along like we been used to. They's . . . they's things that money can't buy."

The ache in the stout man's voice hurt Heritage. He made haste to change the subject.

" I suppose we'll have to go along to the Green Valley depôt and make arrangements to get our trucks through to the twenty-mile. If only Pete would come back he and I could go along together. What with Mr. Adaire still away and Strangways laid up with rheumatism we're about as short-handed as I want to see. Still, we're not doing badly."

For a moment Salter was silent.

" In one way we are," he said presently. " I think we'll come out on top in the long run, but already we've paid a price we never dreamt of. I ain't thinking of . . of Jean now. That must have happened, I suppose, no matter what we were at. It was jess fate. What I meant was that this timber business is a fake from start to finish. It's broke up things as they used to be ; it's changed us all, in more ways than one. They's Peggy now—and her father. A fine old man is old Phil. But where is he ? What's he gone for ? Why ain't we heard of him ? And Peggy there eating her heart out. They's something fishy about the whole business. I don't like it."

" Nor do I," admitted Heritage. " We can only hope for the best."

The stout man looked at him with bitter eyes.

" Eh, that's the word, ain't it ? " he said. " As you say, we can jess hope. Oh, it's a great word. They's Jeannie gone—and Pete . . . God knows where Pete is ! But we'll keep on hoping. And they's the old mother and Peggy back there at the house eating their hearts out in sorrow that's none of their own making. And that poor girl Sadie half crazed . . . But we'll keep on hoping ; though what they can be to hope for I don't know. They's nothing worse can happen any of us."

In the act of turning away he stopped and laid a hand on the young man's arm.

" Jack, I wasn't sneering at you jess then. You ain't to think that. I know all this has hurt you pretty near as much as it has the rest of us. And I suppose after all it ain't any use my kicking. I mustn't be a quitter. Jeannie wouldn't like that. She's expecting us to go right on and beat up these timber wolves. I tell you I know it. And so we will. But they's bad times ahead. Listen now, what's those two plain-clothes police doing loafing around The Bend ? Who sent for them ? What are they after ? "

" You mean the men George Judney told us about ? "

asked Heritage, startled. "I never knew they were police."

"Well, you know it now," said Salter soberly. "Don't tell any of your business when them fellows are around. And keep Pete's name off your tongue. I don't know anything, but I'm guessing a whole lot these days."

Heritage had small opportunity to speculate on the stout man's meaning. The work called unceasingly. In the absence of Steve Strangways he took charge of the gang on the Lagoon block, where some valuable figured trees lay waiting haulage before the advent of the wet season. The reason for Salter's evident anxiety to handle these was not at once apparent. The fine weather showed no sign of breaking. The bush was bone dry. The monotony of hot, muggy days went unrelieved saving for an occasional windstorm which, however, always failed in its promise of rain.

Towards noon of his third day in the bush Heritage got word that a man was waiting to see him outside the stackyard boundary. The request was urgent and he complied at once. A little later he found himself shaking Pete's hand and stammering his delight at seeing the big fellow safe and sound.

"Pete . . . Pete. Why, this is great. We . . . I was afraid . . . you see, I didn't know . . ."

The cattleman smiled gravely.

"I didn't know either, Jack, for quite a time. But I believe I can hold myself now. Them first few days I near went mad. I think I should have, only for getting away on my own like I done. It was Jeannie that taught me that trick, too. She used to say she could always fight trouble better away out on the plains by herself than she could cooped up inside of four walls, in company of folks that mightn't understand. I reckon that holds true with most of us."

Heritage looked up from smoothing Pup's shining coat.

"We'll be mighty glad to have you back with us, Pete. It's been pretty miserable lately. Seen any of the others yet?"

"I slept at Salter's place last night. Eh, now you'll wonder how I could do that—and in Jeannie's old room too! I had a fancy that way. I kind of thought she'd more easy come to me there in my sleep. I reckon I was wrong."

"You didn't dream of her then?" said Heritage.

"I couldn't sleep," explained the cattleman simply. "I ain't slept through a full night since . . . well, you know. We won't talk of that. Listen! . . . that old lady, Salter, is a woman in a thousand. She must be suffering hell, but you couldn't guess that by looking at her. She's that kind and gentle in her ways . . . tending to Sadie Williams. Jack, what's the matter with our bit of a world? Jess a bit of a girl like that . . . it ain't hardly believable. And she don't say a word."

"I know," said Heritage in a low voice.

This was tragedy of another sort, and no less inexplicable. The whole happening was so sordid, so utterly useless; yet he knew that, after all, such things were an integral part of life, were as intimately mixed in the woof and warp of existence as any act of saintly martyrdom. And this in the teeth of the purists.

He said presently, "Pete, I hear that the old man has thrown her off. Just fancy. The old pig!"

"Is that so," said Pete, with a queer intonation. He was silent a moment, gazing out across the wide sweep of wilting bush that curved like the horns of a ram to encircle the space of the stackyards. Between the points of the horns showed a narrow strip of track that lost itself quickly in the thick button-grass of the plains beyond. Right ahead hung the pencilled outline of the hills, their steely glitter of slope and summit streaked with long lines of purple shadow where the highlands split to the cool, fragrant depths of innumerable gully beds.

Heritage seized the opportunity to furtively study his friend's appearance. Pete was certainly thinner, but his body appeared to have lost nothing of its alert, sinewy strength. His face alone remained a melancholy index to the mental struggle through which he had passed. The brilliant black eyes were sunken in their sockets, the nostrils were curiously pinched, the cheekbones appeared higher. There was added a tightening—a clamping together, as it might be—of the big, stubborn jaws that seemed to hint at tremendous self-repression.

"Is that so?" said Pete again. He looked Heritage full in the face. "Jack, I've heard folks say that we'd all ought to be good because God meant us to be so, because it's natural to be good. What a silly thing to say? It's natural for us to be bad—damned bad. But they's some folks make up

for the rest of us. Listen now, till I tell you something. Sadie ain't ever going back to the Ferry house. Mrs. Salter and Charley aim to keep the girl with them for always. Now that . . . that Jeannie's been took, the old folk sort of want someone to fill the gap in the home. That's the kind of woman Mrs. Salter is. Can you beat it? It takes the poor to help the poor. She's going to take and tend that poor girl like she was her own flesh and blood. Sadie's gone as far down into the pit as she'll ever go. Now she's going on and up as far as God'll let her."

"What does she say to the arrangement?" asked Heritage.

"Why, at first she wouldn't listen. She didn't want it to be that way. She kept calling out that she wasn't good enough, that she was only fit to die. And the old lady jess sat there patting her shoulder and talking kind and slow like. 'We want you for our own sakes, as much as for yours,' she says. 'We're counting on you to help soothe the sore spot in our hearts, and I reckon you ain't the girl to turn us down. You're just the one our own girl would have picked for us if she could have seen how things was going to turn out. You'll stay with me and Charley, won't you?' she says. 'You know what I am,' says Sadie. But the old lady wouldn't listen to that talk. 'I know what you're going to be,' she says. 'And Jean loved you.' 'Do you think she did?' says Sadie. And then she begins crying. 'I'd have died for Jeannie any day,' she says. 'If you want me I'll stay with you . . . and thank God on my knees for the chance he's giving me. Why, she kissed me. She must have cared or she couldn't have done that. I tell you she kissed me that night,' she says."

The cattleman sighed.

"Jack, I think maybe she was talking of Jeannie then, but I don't rightly know. She wouldn't say another word."

"Well, I'm glad Sadie will find a home with such grand people," said Heritage a little huskily. "And what of you, Pete? Are you coming back to camp now?"

"No," said Pete. He pointed to the horses tethered to the yard rails. "They's something to do first. That's why I sent along for you. I'm going to take and show you . . . well, you'll see for yourself presently. You can ride Tack. Let's get along."

Without another word of explanation he climbed into his saddle and led the way over the plain. At the end of twenty

minutes Pete turned towards Grey Lagoon. At first Heritage thought the big fellow was taking him to the cemetery where Jean Salter lay, but they kept straight on past the turn-off. And then Heritage suddenly rounded an arm of the bush and found Pete dismounted and waiting for him by the side of Berrigan's Gum.

The big tree lay as it had fallen, its girth almost blocking the narrow track with a breast-high barrier of seamed and splintered deadwood. Part of it had been driven deeply into the soft ground, so that the grey, lichen-covered surface appeared as some huge saurian stretched belly-deep amid the ferns and rubbish of the fore-shore. The head of the tree had lodged against the rock wall of a hillock abutting the track. The limbs here and there smashed bodily in their descent and now presented a confused, impenetrable jumble of jagged ends and twisted barrels which covered the ground for yards around.

Of the tree itself Pete took little notice. Grimly silent he led Heritage to the former pedestal of the fallen monarch.

" Have a good look round, Jack, and tell me what you see," he suggested quietly.

A good deal bewildered Heritage ran his eyes slowly over the ground at their feet. The scrutiny, however, brought him nothing of his friend's meaning. He was forced to confess as much.

" I don't get your idea. I see no more than one might expect to see under the circumstances. There is just the usual appearance of a big butt half torn, half lifted by the wind."

Pete gathered up a handful of the soil and passed it to the young man.

" Have a look at that then. And bear in mind that this tree—so far as you are supposed to know—fell of its own accord. They's never been axe nor saw laid to it. The fires have hit it now and then, so you'll find a little ash where the roots have run. What else have you got in your hand there ? "

" Sawdust," said Heritage, after a moment's inspection.

" Jess so ! Now see here ? " With his two hands the cattleman uncovered part of a big root whose edge showed above the surface of the ground. " There's where your sawdust come from, and there's where your saw bit. For a wonder she didn't lift clean off when she broke. The grain

ran up, as you can see, and left part of the cut clear. What do you make of them black marks on the wood ? "

" Wedge marks," answered Heritage, this time without hesitation. Suddenly comprehending the drift of Pete's remarks he looked at the big fellow in consternation. " Why but the thing's impossible—utterly impossible. I don't deny the evidence of what you show me, but surely it's absurd to suggest that this tree was fallen deliberately by someone while Jean was here. Think of the difficulty of such a theory. For example, how could it be possible to grub a tree of this size so exactly as to make its falling dependent on the removal of a couple of wedges ? Besides, who would want to do such a devilish thing to Jean—or to anyone else ? How could he know she would be there—and at that moment ? We know ourselves that her going with Sadie that night was pure accident. Again, there was a fair wind blowing. Under the circumstances no man could count on the thing happening to order."

The cattleman brought his palms together with a smack.

" You're wrong, Jack, all wrong. I tell you that Berrigan's Gum was fallen, like it is, on purpose. Bah, a thing like that would be child's play to a man reared in the big timber, a man that knew his business as this man did. I could name you a dozen men on the coast here that could hang most any tree you like to point them out by a couple of splinters, and fall it when and where they liked. This tree ? . . . they was only the two big roots at the back and the one in front that kept her in the air at any time. As for the wind, it was a cross wind. That's the only stroke of luck this man had. It was a cross wind, and couldn't count much anyhow. Them sounds George heard jess before she came down, what d'you suppose they was ? Frogs croaking in the swamp ? I tell you they come when the wedges were knocked out and the last of the back stay cut. It was what George told me set me to thinking like this first."

Heritage was dumbfounded.

" But—whoever it was—how could he know Jean would be here ? And why harm her, anyhow ? She never had a real enemy on the coast. Was there anyone that didn't know her to be one of the grandest girls ever lived ? Why did he do it ? "

" How the hell do I know," said Pete, with such swift

fierceness that Heritage winced involuntarily. A mad light had come to the cattleman's black eyes; his voice was vibrant with anger. "I can tell you this much though. God help the man that done it. If I spend the rest of my life over it I'll find him out. And then . . . "

He turned aside, his shoulders shaking.

"Let's get home," he said presently in a smothered voice.

Heritage did not venture to speak again until they were within sight of the yards.

"Pete . . . old chap . . . I wish to God there was something I could do to help . . . "

A singularly sweet expression crossed the haggard face of the big fellow. His mouth worked oddly at the corners.

"I know . . . I know. Jack, you must try to take me as you find me these days. I'm sort of sorry I flashed out at you like I done jess now. My mind ain't too clear. They's things go blank all of a sudden like. I don't rightly know what I'm doing then. Maybe it's because I can't sleep of nights. We're friends, ain't we?"

"If you dare hint that we're not, I'll . . . I'll, why, I'll hit you when you're not looking and then run for help," laughed Heritage. But his eyes were misty as he gripped the hand Pete thrust at him across the saddle.

Presently he resumed: "Charley Salter wants someone to go along to Green Valley to see about the trucks. They have them there now; but there's some hitch and they won't send them up. Shall you and I go?"

"We'll light out to-morrow morning, if you like," said Pete, more in his usual tones. He looked up quickly. "Hullo! what's wrong with Sollum."

The little man had emerged from the door of the hut. At sight of them he moved quickly across. His face was puckered angrily.

"They's a two-coloured, button-grass spawn of a creek lobster sitting inside over there, jess like he owned the place," he said without preface. "I was jess going to bust him right open and look inside to see where all the questions come from, when I hearn your horses." He looked at the cattleman with a smile of genuine pleasure. "Why, Pete, I'm damned glad to see you. George will be tickled to death to know you're back."

"Let's have a quiz at your caller," suggested Pete, as the two men shook hands. Entering the hut he muttered dis-

gustedly to Heritage, " Darned if it ain't Samuels, the freight clerk."

Garraway's latest ally eyed them with a mixture of dislike and apprehension on his pasty face.

Pete smiled grimly.

" So it's you, is it, Samuels ? Now you take a word of advice from me. Get back to your own side of the fence and stay there. You ain't up to any good coming along here, I'll bet."

" I looked in to let you know your trucks were at the Valley," said the man sullenly. " This is all I get for doing a friendly action."

" We don't ask your help," retorted Pete ; " You light out of here, and stay out . . . savee ! Else maybe you'll learn a thing or two."

" Don't you lay a hand on me," said Samuels shrilly. He rose to his feet with a spiteful glance round the hut. " I know a thing or two already, if it comes to that. I know . . . " He appeared to recollect himself, and gulped resentfully. " I know a thing or two, I do," he finished lamely.

" Well, what *do* you know ? " demanded Pete, half amused.

" Never mind," said Samuels.

At the door, however, he stopped and looked back.

" How's the whisky peddling, eh ? " he asked.

The grin which accompanied the words was premature. Before he was well aware of what had happened the cattleman had caught him by his collar and the slack of his trousers and was propelling him swiftly over the yards to the gateway, through which he was sent sprawling with a well-directed kick. He scrambled upright, his face convulsed.

" By God, you'll pay for that ! I'll teach you to put your filthy hands on me. I know more than you think, and . . . "

" Get him going, Pup," called Pete softly.

The kangaroo dog rose bristling. His ears flattened as he trotted forward. From his throat came a rumble of warning.

For a single instant Samuels faced the approaching animal with a bitter, venomous stare. Then he turned and fled, his long legs taking him swiftly over the uneven ground. In imagination he heard behind him the pad of the dog's feet. Fresh terror lent him wings. He tore recklessly through the undergrowth, cruelly barking his shins against the timber

and scarifying his face and hands with the over-hanging branches. When finally he stopped and looked around, it was to shake his fists meaningly in the direction of his enemies.

That evening while Garraway and Rebner were inspecting some of the belting at the mill, Samuels abruptly made his appearance round the end of a log stack.

Garraway nodded carelessly.

" It's about time you came, ain't it ? If you hadn't, turned up by morning I was going down to see you. Well what about it ? "

" I done my best, but it's no good," said the freight clerk shortly. As he spoke he applied a match to his pipe. The burnt end, thrown aside without caution, held a spark sufficient to ignite the pile of shavings stacked for kindling by the side of the boiler. With an angry imprecation Garraway stamped out the sudden flare.

" Haven't you got more sense than to do a thing like that ? " he demanded savagely. " Gosh ! you know what the season is. It's not only the mill that might burn. If a fire got going properly now the whole coast would melt from end to end. Hundreds of acres of milling leasehold would go up. You ought to be crucified ! "

" I'm sorry," muttered Samuels. He was staring at the thin wisp of smoke that curled upwards from the pile of charred shavings. A look of cunning came on his face.

" She'd have travelled like a racehorse," supplemented Rebner. He lit his own pipe. " We don't want to be out of a job ; eh, Boss ? "

Garraway held up an impatient hand.

" Never mind that now. So you can't hold up Salter any longer, is that it, Jim ? Well, Frame's due here any day now. He'll lob along just in nice time to spot that fat fraud's staves going in to market, with us standing on one side like a lot of silly kids. The old man'll like that, won't he ? He'll raise curried hell on the lot of us."

" Well, but I won't stand for too much," grumbled Rebner. He thought a moment. " There's other men to work for, ain't they ? Tom wants me to go along to the west coast with him. Maybe I will. The way things are going, I don't much care what I do."

" I'd be fine and glad to hear of a way to hold Salter up till Frame gets here, anyway," said Garraway. The reference

to Tom Login irritated him. It was only the night before that the section boss had surprised and angered Garraway by declaring his intention to give over bushwhacking and tackle a job at one of the west coast mines. Login had refused to listen to the manager's persuasion.

"If there is one I don't know of it," grunted Rebner. "Unless, of course, you get the boys together and beat that other mob up. We could do it all right."

"There's a better way than that," said Samuels.

"Name it," invited Garraway briefly.

The freight clerk began to speak in a voice scarcely louder than a whisper. As he proceeded Garraway rose from his seat. His face was flaming in a kind of horror.

"By God, no!" he said. "I'll have nothing to do with anything like that. What a brute you are, Samuels!"

"You're too squeamish," said the clerk contemptuously.

"I tell you I'll not," said Garraway. He plucked nervously at his lips. "I'll stand for most things, but that's a bit too thick. It's little short of murder."

"You wouldn't know anything about it, unless you wanted to," said Samuels swiftly. He leant forward, his eyes glinting. "See here, Mr. Garraway, what's the matter with you? I'm trying to help, ain't I? Those folks come on the bounce and you don't like it. You kick back, but you don't kick hard enough. You close up when you ought to open out. And now I'm handing you the one way to clean things up, you won't listen to me. Your friends must stand a lot of discouragement."

"I won't touch it," said the manager, for the third time. But his tone lacked its former vehemence.

Samuels' eyelids fluttered. He glanced quickly at Rebner. "No one asks you to; eh, Gus? You don't know a thing about it. You're odd man out just watching the fun."

"Be careful what you're doing," said Garraway sharply.

"Watch me," retorted the clerk. He held his head on one side in the attitude of listening.

"Hear that?" he said.

A low menacing sound suddenly obtruded itself on the quiet of the night. At first barely audible it swelled gradually to a sullen roar that resembled the far-off muttering of a storm. Again and again the sound was repeated.

Garraway looked up with a little shudder. It was notice-

able that his ordinary truculence seemed to have deserted him. His face looked sober.

" The sea getting up over Pung's Crossing," he said slowly. " There's wind behind that."

" In a few hours they'll come a bust that would blow the tail feathers out of the gamest rooster that ever crowed," agreed Rebner.

He went to the door and stood there gazing out into the night.

CHAPTER XXII

NOON of the next day found Heritage and Pete Diamond riding up to the entrance of Hennessy's hotel at Green Valley. With a lively recollection of his previous visit to the place Heritage regarded the crazy structure distastefully.

"I'm afraid I shall go hungry if we are reduced to dining here," he remarked to the cattleman. "Isn't there somewhere else we can go?"

Pete smiled.

"I never meant to do more than stall the horses here anyway," he said. "They's a friend of Salter's close handy. We'll get some dinner there. We can go down to the yards afterwards."

"They tell me the chap in charge at the line is away at Sun Port and won't be back till about three this afternoon," he resumed, as later they made their way across the paddocks. "That being so we can sit back and yarn awhile to Charley's friend. Lancy's his name. You'll find him a decent sort. He's a sort of cripple. He can't get around much. That's why you ain't ever seen him along The Bend."

Lancy, a grizzled bachelor with a withered right leg, proved well worth knowing. He chatted freely with Heritage, revealing an astonishing acquaintance with the young man's business.

"You see, Mr. Heritage, Charley keeps me pretty well posted on how things are going around the coast," he explained. "I take near as much interest in this timber venture as you do yourselves. Pete, you'll both come back here for a snack after you've put your business through at the yards, eh? There's no need for you to hurry home, is there? Well, then come right along."

They left with that understanding. Out in the open the

muggy heat was intense. The air danced and flickered towards the sky-line, where the vast upheave of the hills loomed through a haze of greyish mist. As the day advanced the air became full of a curious throbbing. The shadows cowering in the deep crannies of the foot-hills changed from black to purple and then to grey, merging upwards to meet the glare of the sun-lit slopes beyond. From the east a wind stirred sluggishly.

The man in charge of the yards proved surly and hard to convince. In the end Heritage was forced to show him the letter from the management. They left with an assurance that their trucks would be sent on to The Bend early on the morrow.

As they emerged once again into the open a puff of warm wind came down the valley and died away. The heat settled more closely together.

Pete looked at Heritage undecidedly.

"What say, Jack? Shall we get home right away or try some more of Lancy's conversation?"

"Lancy an easy first," said Heritage. "I prefer to do my travelling in the cool, if it's all the same to you. I'm not sun-hardened like the rest of you."

The cattleman grinned.

"All right then. Our mokes will be safe enough at Hennessy's with Pup minding them. Got the brains of a Christian that dog."

They found Lancy on his verandah. He was eyeing the sky with an anxious expression on his wrinkled face.

"We're in for something of a wind storm by the looks of things," he announced. "You'll be riding home against a head wind. Well, come on in and have a drink of tea. How did you get on about your trucks?"

Afterwards, as they sat outside in the comparative cool of the dusk, Lancy voiced a further opinion.

"It's a dead east wind you'll notice. And mostly in the air at that. I make free to say I don't like this puffing-billy business. Most always it means a steady gale at the finish. And that ain't good at the tail of a dry spell like this."

Slowly the darkness deepened under the western timber line. On either side of the house the gum bushes rustled stealthily, their wilted foliage glimmering grey against the dusk. Before, rose the straight white barrels of the dead gums fronting the line of living bush. At each gust of wind

myriad fingers of rotting wood moved in spectral tracery over the background of the fading sky.

Quite unexpectedly Pete sat upright. He thrust his head out, sniffing at the air.

"Smell anything, Joe?" he asked uneasily of the cripple.

The wind was up again. This time it came charged with a distinct odour of burning.

"By Jove, you're right! I believe the bush is on fire somewhere," exclaimed Lancy. His concern was instantly apparent.

Pete rose to his feet.

"I don't like the look of things, Jack. We'll be wise to get the horses and dodge back home. They's no business to be fire in that quarter. Lord, the bush is tinder! And we got a matter of seventy thousand staves in the yards. Green, but they'll burn. See you some more, Lancy."

The cripple's farewell was lost in the sudden clatter of the iron gable as a gust of wind caught it, wrestled fiercely for a moment about the building, then passed on whining into the face of the night.

"Is there really danger to the stacks?" asked Heritage, as they hurried along. He had to shout to make himself heard.

"There's always danger at this time of year," Pete called back over his shoulder. "This may only be some dub of a selector burning a few logs in his back yard. Then again it mightn't. In this country you never know what's what."

Pup ran out from the stables to meet them. The cattleman waited a second to pat the dog's smooth coat and utter a word of greeting. "Good old boy, then. They won't be anyone get to meddling with Tick and Tack while you're around to see to things, eh? Good lad."

Once in the open the force of the wind was intensified. For a time speech was impossible. Not until they dipped into a hollow of the valley did Heritage find an opportunity to attract his companion's attention.

"We're sure to get rain after this, don't you think?" he bawled anxiously. "See the clouds blotting the stars ahead of us."

"Not clouds—smoke," corrected Pete laconically. He pushed closer to Heritage. "Jack, I don't want to worry you, but they's no doubt in my mind that Timber Bend's

afire. See the glow low down to the right. There's been devil's work somewhere."

He set spurs to his horse and rode on again. Heritage's thoughts were anything but comforting. If Timber Bend was indeed within the compass of the fire there remained small hope that their staves had escaped destruction. Loss of them meant sheer ruin. His heart went sick at thought of what it might mean.

As he rode grimly after the cattleman a new sound mingled with the rush of the wind overhead. There came presently a low, sullen booming not unlike the roll of surf along the coast after a heavy sea, but with an insistence denied the latter. The sound seemed to spring from somewhere out of the obscurity at their feet. And then, as they turned an elbow of scrub, an astounding sight met his eyes. From the jet-black cloud hugging the horizon leapt suddenly a broad sheet of flame. For a second the sky glowed at white heat, then a roll of smoke drove up and blotted it again from view.

Pete Diamond had pulled his horse to a standstill. As Heritage came up the cattleman twisted in his saddle and called : " Jack, the plains on the edge of The Bend are ablaze. The way the wind has been set that can mean only one thing. It means that the fire has driven right across from the river. You bet our staves are gone."

" I suppose so," answered Heritage mechanically. His thoughts were bitter beyond expression. Hot anger surged in his heart to recall the fatality which had deemed to dodge his footsteps since coming to Timber Bend. For a time resentment choked his utterance. He sat hunched in his saddle, fighting desperately against a depression which threatened to overwhelm him.

Pete gave a sharp exclamation. He wet a finger in his mouth and held it above his head.

" By the Lord Harry, the wind's changing ! Not that it can matter to us now, but I mention it as a fact. She's gone round a full point in the last few minutes. She's about blown herself out and now she's off rain hunting. It's too late for us, anyhow. The fire will carry on jess the same till the rain comes. Watch out and see if I ain't right. In a minute or so you'll see the timber ahead of us go up."

Even as he spoke the thing happened. From the gloom in front a red flare burst instantaneously, flashed across the

arc of sky and died away. A cone of smoke sprang upwards, flattened, then spread fanwise to fade away into the night. The darkness deepened, hanging like a pall over the timber belt. Suddenly it was shot with a tiny thread of flame high overhead. Another and another followed in quick succession. The smell of burning bush grew stronger. The tiny flame points quivered against the velvet blackness, hung there flaming, then launched themselves into jagged pinnacles of fire. They multiplied amazingly. It looked as if an unseen hand rained tiny meteors upon the earth. The far-off outline of the trees became tipped with red spirals of flame.

Pete touched Heritage on the arm. His voice came harshly through the lessening clamour of the wind.

"It's hell, ain't it? I know how you're feeling, Jack. Me? I don't care much what happens now, one way or another. So far's I'm concerned the Almighty's done His damndest . . . but I reckon He ain't heard me squeal yet. It's you and the folks on the farm that I'm thinking of now. Well, Charley's house is safe, if it comes to that. He built where he is on purpose to dodge fires. They's good clean ground all around him."

Heritage's own mood was changing. At the cattleman's words he was conscious of a feeling of shame. His outlook might be desperate enough in all conscience, yet he suddenly realized that it was not comparable with that of this unselfish, uncomplaining man beside him. Heritage's manhood began to rebuke him. After all, why should he hope to escape the ups and downs of existence. Youth and determination were still his to call upon; ambition was his to set before him as a beacon upon the heights of his courage; hope was his, and charity, and the sustaining influences of his upbringing and education. But for Pete Diamond what promise for the future could gainsay the tragedy of the past? The big fellow was stricken to the core. Never now would he know surcease of sorrow. Never again might his imprisoned soul look out between its bars of heredity and early environment to glimpse the immortal glory of the beyond. For him, unless by a miracle, remained nought but the ashes of his recklessness and bitter unbelief. No longer seen in the mirror of Jean Salter's clear eyes, the ugliness that marred his nature—those traits which were his by pitiful birthright—must go unrecognised and unrebuked. Heritage knew it must be so. The Salters knew it. Cruellest of all Pete

himself knew it. In spite of that the big fellow would not cower. His attitude was expressed perfectly by the words he had just spoken: "The Almighty has done His damndest, but He ain't heard me squeal." Here was no blasphemy. The words were no more than the despairing echo of a soul stricken and bewildered, yet holding fast to its concept of manhood; the stubborn adherence to a code evolved in the crucible of ignorance and want.

"Do you believe they's such a thing as luck, Jack?" asked Pete abruptly, as they went forward once more.

"I'm beginning to," said Heritage.

"I reckon no sane man would deny it. One man can't go wrong; another can't do a thing right. I've seen it happen time after time. And it ain't a matter of faith nor good living either. We're a combination of Jonahs. Them old Egyptian fellers Jeannie used to tell of was pretty right after all. They's such a thing as being born under a lucky star. Well, it can't matter much now."

"No," said Heritage listlessly.

Pete flashed him a quick glance.

"Jack, don't let it get you that way. And yet . . . I'm going to ast a question of you that p'raps ain't any of my business. Me and . . . and Jeannie used to think one time that you and Peggy Adaire . . . Jack, they's something made trouble between you two. Or am I wrong?"

"God knows you're only too right," burst out the young man. "Pete, I don't know what the matter is. It's just another strand of the tangle all around us. If you don't mind we won't discuss that."

For a second he felt the big fellow's hand in friendly pressure on his shoulder.

"I reckon I knew it. And yet I got a feeling things will come right for you after all. But me? Jack, I don't seem able to see ahead. I've got a queer thought that they's no need to bother about the future. It's as if they wasn't going to be any—for me; as if things was fixed already in some way I don't understand. Life is a rum thing, ain't it? Young or old they's no dodging the thing that's coming to meet us."

Heritage had little doubt that Pete was thinking of Phil Adaire. Quite suddenly he remembered that his real reason for seeking the old man must still be unknown to the cattle-

man. He had told only Jean and Peggy. For a moment he was prompted to enlighten his friend but reflected that there was little need for urgency after all. Pete undoubtedly identified Adaire with Barkley. The conclusion was hard to avoid. Heritage himself was now certain of the fact. Yet there still remained much of mystery about the whole matter. If Adaire was Barkley why should the old man conceal it? Why disappear so suddenly and inexplicably? Why did Peggy not speak, now that she knew the whole circumstances of his quest? The more Heritage reflected the more complex the matter appeared.

The gale had died to a gentle breeze. Within a mile of home they found themselves riding over country still smouldering faintly. A quarter of an hour later they dismounted at the yards.

"Not knowing what we may want to do, I reckon we'll hitch one of the mokes to the fence for awhile," said Pete. He led the way silently to the house. Arrived there a startled word escaped him.

"Lord, who's this? By Gum, Charley, I hardly knew you!"

The stout man was literally in rags. He stood in the doorway looking at them without a word.

"Well?" asked Pete sharply.

"Gone . . . all gone. Every stick of them," said Salter huskily. He led the way inside and sat himself heavily down by the cold hearth. They saw that his face was so black and smoke-grimed as to be scarcely recognisable. It was evidence of his state of mind that he had not troubled even to clean himself.

"Where are the women folk?" asked Heritage apprehensively.

"I sent them to bed. They's no danger for the house. What's the good of talking? We're down and out."

Pete looked slowly round the room.

"How did the thing start, Charley?"

The stout man regarded him apathetically.

"I don't know. Does it matter? We've got left us the house here and what's on our backs. It's a hell of a joke, ain't it? They's this much about it though . . . Frame was caught as well as us. The mill burnt as clean as a whistle—sheds, engine-house and all. And most of his log stacks went too. The railway yards burnt, and about

a mile of line. What's the odds? We've no use now for a tramline. Did you get them trucks? They'll be useful, won't they?"

"Anyone hurt?" asked Heritage in turn. "What about our men? Where are they?"

"Camping at the Ferry house most of them," said Salter. "Old George and Sollum went along to Ryan's in case the fire worked round that way. Ted Ryan's away from home and they's a sick baby in the house. Was they anyone hurt, says you. Well, they tell me that man Samuels got himself roasted near to a cinder. Gus Rebner broke an arm and, only for Garraway, would have burned too. They got out just in time. It was the wind changing that done it. The fire curled round its two ends and come right back on them before they guessed what was doing. We done our best, all of us. We might jess as well saved the worry. They was as much hope of putting that fire out as they would be of dousing hell by spitting into it."

The absurdity of the comparison failed to amuse the others. Heritage was frankly beyond emotion of any kind. He was desperately tired. He wanted to defer any further discussion until the morning. Even the news of Frame's loss failed to arouse in him more than a passing interest.

"What'll we do now? What'll we do now?" asked Salter. He looked helplessly at Pete.

"I don't know," said the cattleman slowly. "It's no use trying to figure things out until we get some sleep,anyhow. Maybe in the morning it won't look so bad. They's a way out of most trouble if you can only find it." He added sharply, "What is it, Pup?"

The dog was growling uneasily. At the words he padded softly to Pete's side and stood there, his lean shapely head pointed at the half-open door. The hair of his neck began to bristle.

With a quick movement the cattleman slipped his fingers beneath the animal's collar, holding him so. Almost at the same instant came the click of the gate without.

"Some of the boys," muttered Salter.

He rose wearily to his feet and left the room. Heritage heard the tramp of feet along the path and the echo of a quick-spoken sentence. Then came the stout man's voice, high-pitched and defiant.

"I don't care who you are. You can't bust into my

house any way you like. I don't know where Pete Diamond is. I ain't seen him for nigh a week."

Followed the sound of scuffling. Through the door came two men whom Heritage had no difficulty in recognising as the two strangers whose presence on The Bend had caused Salter so much uneasiness. The stout man followed after. His little eyes were alight with anger and a kind of unwilling apprehension.

The foremost man threw Salter a malicious glance across his shoulder.

"You fat liar. I thought you hadn't seen Diamond for a week. And here he is."

"We all make mistakes," retorted Salter, with careless contempt. "You made yours when you come in here without proper authority. You'll hear more about this."

Pete had not moved. He was looking at the intruders with a puzzled frown on his tired face.

"Well, you've got your own manners, whoever you are," he said. "What's your business with me anyhow?"

"We're revenue detectives," answered the man briefly.

The cattleman continued to stare.

"Well?" he prompted.

"Oh, if you want a lecture on it . . . " said the other. He shrugged his shoulders. "You want to know more, do you? As if you didn't know. The game's up so far as you are concerned. I hope you'll have sense enough to see that and come along without trouble. I know you think you're a hard nut, and all that, but you take it from me it won't pay you to kick. Slow and steady's the word. We'll leave when you're ready."

Pete laughed harshly.

"You go too fast yourself. What's the matter with you, anyway? What do you think you want *me* for? If it's a joke it's a dashed silly one."

"You're a sly-grog peddler," said the revenue man. At the words his body seemed to stiffen itself.

There was a moment's silence.

"Who told you that?" asked Pete slowly.

"So long as it's true that don't matter a snap. You'll have your chance in court to do all the talking you like. Suppose we get a move along? We're pretty decent, but we don't aim to do any arguing."

The cattleman's lips quivered, but he did not speak. He

looked from Salter to Heritage many times, as if seeking from the indignant faces of his friends some clue to a right understanding of this crowning calamity. For a minute or two his senses were dazed by the bitter injustice of it all. He began to think what he should say to these men, how he might bring them to realisation of their mistake. He would bring the evidence of his friends to expose the damnable nature of this final charge. Well enough he knew it could be none other than Login who had sent these men. Would people then believe Login's word against his ? Why, Jeannie would tell them of her trip to Elbow Ridge, would tell them what she had learnt that night. Jeannie would . . . Something at the back of his mind seemed to snap. Like a flood the truth bore down upon him. Yes, Jeannie, indeed, could have cleared him, but . . . Jeannie was dead. Never again would her eyes flash their defiance of those who sought to harm him, never more might he hear her clear voice comforting, defending, pleading . . . The reality hit him like a blow. His face went suddenly white beneath its tan.

" If you want me, then come and take me," he shouted.

He dropped his hold of Pup's collar and strode towards the door. The nearest policeman caught at him. Like a flash the cattleman turned. His doubled fist smashed into the man's face with an impact that sent him almost to the opposite wall of the room. At almost the same instant the big kangaroo dog launched himself with a snarl at the remaining enemy. His furiously snapping teeth missed their objective by the merest fraction. So swift was his leap that the animal shot over the man's cringing body like a streak of copper flame, clear through the doorway to the boards of the darkened verandah without. Before he could double to a fresh attack Pete was beside him, calling tensely. In a second man and dog had disappeared into the night.

The second policeman had recovered himself. His hand flew to his belt as he started forward on the run. He never reached the door. With a rapidity almost incredible for a man of his bulk Charley Salter thrust out a leg and tripped him deliberately. He fell full length against the table, his revolver clattering to the brisk hearth of the chimney.

" To hell with the police," cried Salter hoarsely.

He swung round to face the first man, now rising to his feet with blood streaming from his broken mouth.

"You pimps . . . you rotten pimps. You haven't the soul nor the brains of a louse between you. If you knew the first thing about Pete Diamond you'd surely know he ain't never peddled one little drop of sly grog in all his poor, pitiful life."

The stout man was transformed. The good-natured, almost timid twinkle of his eyes was changed to a stare of hate; his face was plum coloured; his naked scalp twitched. The bitterness of bereavement, the disruption of all their hopes, the danger that threatened his closest friend—his almost son-in-law, seemed suddenly to have awakened in him that atavistic courage which lies deep in the nature of every man. He was no longer diffident, no longer afraid. In the violence of his anger his teeth chattered like those of an enraged ape.

"You pimps . . . blind-brained pimps. You can try now for a thousand lifetimes but you won't get Pete Diamond. He's a better man than the likes of you could even think of. And, by God! I helped to get him away."

The man ignored him. Helping his comrade to his feet they made for the door. As they went out one of them called back in a furious voice:

"You'll hear a lot more about this, Salter."

"You go to hell," shouted the stout man childishly. His voice cracked. He sat down at the table and rested his head on his outstretched arms.

The whole affair had been a matter of seconds. Throughout Heritage had remained like a man in a dream. Now, as his eyes went round the room, he was aware that the inside door was open. Peggy Adaire was calling his name in a frightened whisper.

"Jack . . . Mr. Heritage? Oh, what is it? What has happened now?"

She was fully dressed, in spite of the fact that she had just come from her bedroom. As if answering the question in his eyes she added quickly:

"I couldn't sleep. I don't want to sleep. I heard your voices and . . . Tell me, what dreadful thing has happened now. Oh! poor Jeannie . . . "

Heritage took hold of her arm gently.

"Peggy, if you can't sleep, neither can the rest of us. A moment ago I was tired to death. But now . . . Listen, dear. The revenue police have been here. They

wanted to arrest Pete for selling sly grog. Think of it! Pete! Jean's Pete, who wouldn't touch a drop of the filthy stuff to save his life."

"Listen . . . listen!" whispered Peggy suddenly.

There sounded the far away neighing of a horse. A little silence succeeded, broken once more by the faint tap of receding hoofs. On the dying wind came the harsh screeching of an owl.

"Aye, of course. They're going after him," said Heritage. He caught the girl's hands in his own. "Peggy . . . dearest . . . don't look so miserable. They'll never catch him. They'll never get Pete to shut him up like they want to. Such a thing would drive him to madness. It would kill him. But they'll never get him."

"Never, please God!" said Peggy brokenly.

With streaming eyes she looked past him to the crumpled figure of the stout man.

CHAPTER XXIII

AT noon on the following day Frame dropped from the trucks to the boardway at the Green Valley yards. News of the destruction of his plant at Timber Bend had reached the timber man as he came down the line. As a natural result he was in one of his most pugnacious moods. When Garraway walked over to greet him Frame burst instantly into a string of angry questions.

"What's all this about the mill burning, Slum? They tell me there's not a rafter left standing. All the way along I've had them yapping it into my ears like a pack of half-starved mongrels. By God! I believe one or two of them are actually glad about it. Well, what's the strength of it?"

"Oh, it's true enough, Mr. Frame," said the manager. He eyed his principal sulkily. "The thing was mostly your own fault, any way. I'm about fed up with the whole business."

Frame choked.

"My fault? What the devil do you mean by that?"

Garraway paused in the act of unhitching the tie-rope from the waiting buggy horses. He looked Frame squarely in the eye this time.

"Call it Samuel's fault then, if you want to split words. Samuels was your man, wasn't he? You sent him along to The Bend here to play hell, didn't you? And well enough he played it. Sent himself there to start with, and pretty near burnt up the whole island."

"They told me something of that too," said Frame harshly. His face held no shadow of pity for the wretched tool gone thus abominably to his death. "So Samuels set the fire going? Now will you tell me what maggot was in your brain to stand by and let him do a thing like that? Why didn't you stop him? You might be a lot of kids from the way you've handled things this last week or so. I want to know."

" Look here, Mr. Frame, you don't suppose we go and burn ourselves out of a job just for the fun of it, do you ?" asked Garraway, with some show of resentment.

It was plain the manager was ill at ease. Since the fire a queer expression had settled on his face. He seemed all at once to have become more thoughtful, even a little wistful.

He resumed presently: " I never held with Samuel's notion. I told him so. I suppose we had to do something anyway. You sent word to hold Salter at any cost until you came. Well, we've done it. And now you're finding the price too big for you. Yet I can tell you that if the wind hadn't changed when it did, you'd have been sitting here now handing out smiles instead of curses."

" Pshaw ! " muttered the timber man. For a long time he sat huddled silently in his seat, his face puckered in thought and his teeth chewing savagely on the butt of his cold cigar.

" Of course I'm sorry for the whole thing," pursued Garraway, after an interval. This time he spoke more equably, as if realising the relationship between them. " You've got young Heritage stopped, anyhow. He'll send no staves to market this season."

Frame roused himself with an exclamation.

" Heritage ? Bah ! I had that young puppy stopped any time I liked. I've had him just where I wanted him from the very start. Good God ! do you think I had to spend the price of a saw-mill and three log stacks to do it ? "

He fell once more to frowning silence, from time to time peering from beneath his heavy brows at the interminable vista of charred plain over which they were driving. In the early hours of the morning almost torrential downpour of rain had succeeded the calm after the gale. The water had settled the burnt ground to a pulpy, sticky ash which clung to the buggy wheels with the tenacity of clay and spattered the occupants with little globules of greasy moisture. Of this, however, Frame took no notice. He remained silent until they came within sight of the green country bordering the river. Then his lips opened to ask a single surly question.

" Where's Login ? "

" Gone," said Garraway with equal brevity.

" Gone ? What do you mean by that ? Gone where ? "

" Paid off last night," said Garraway. " If he hasn't actually left the place, he means to soon. He says he's

going for a job on one of the west coast mines. He don't give any reason. And that's all I can tell you about it."

"I see," observed the timber man. There was a world of meaning in his tone. "Trust the rats to leave the sinking ship, eh, Slum? Well, this ship ain't sunk yet, not by a long chalk. As you know, the mill was insured. The fire is a setback but nothing more. In a couple of months we'll be going full swing again. Now you just take note of this one thing. If Login comes back to The Bend he don't get a job from me. Understand?"

"I ought to," said Garraway. He gave his employer a curious glance.

At a fork of the track he pulled the buggy up.

"I suppose you want to go along to the mill site and make your own estimate of the damage?" he asked.

"Not yet," said Frame sharply. He glanced at his watch. "Not yet, Slum. That can wait till later. Drive on to Salter's farm. Heritage and all the crowd are camped there now, you say? Good! We'll go along and hand them their medicine and get it done with. I'm in the mood to mix the dose strong. Lord, I wouldn't forego this for a thousand pounds!"

Whatever his thought was it appeared to restore his good humour. The frown left his face. Once more he became the man Heritage had known and liked in the days before his enlightenment—smiling, smooth-spoken, heavily good-natured. He thrust his cigar case at Garraway almost affectionately.

"Take a couple, Slum, my boy. They're the best. Win chose them for me just before I left home. You remember Win, eh? Smart girl that, though I say it myself. She's to marry Speedie the share-broker in the spring. We'll pull through after all, eh? Trust two hard-bitten old dogs like us to dodge the puddles along the road. Well, well! we must make the best of things. I was a bit put out at first, you understand. That's all over, eh?"

George Judney, pottering aimlessly around the barn, was the first to sight the approaching buggy. For a long minute he stared, his lips shaping to a dubious whistle at recognition of Garraway. Frame he had never seen before, yet guessed instinctively that the burly man sitting beside the manager could be no other than the timber man himself. The discovery was disturbing. Although ignorant of their mission the hutkeeper shrewdly calculated it to be the

reverse of friendly. With a final glance he went swiftly along to the house.

" They's a surprise party coming," he called to Heritage, who was talking earnestly with Salter and Sollum on the verandah. " Slum Garraway is driving Frame along to see us. They'll be here in about five minutes. I'll bet they's mischief in the wind."

" Frame, eh ? " said Heritage.

The four men eyed each other in silence for a moment. Heritage had a hard light in his eyes. He rose carefully to his feet and squared his shoulders.

" Well, I'm not surprised. We've known all along that Frame would turn up sooner or later. The plain fact is that he probably thinks he has now a good opportunity to try to intimidate us, or bluff us into some compromise whereby he gets all he wants and we get nothing. Last night (or early this morning, I should say) we talked things out and decided to fight on. And we stick to that. Personally I'll see this man damned before I let him grab a single foot of our holding."

" Go to it, Jack," said the stout man approvingly. "That's the spirit. And if Frame wants to talk, let him come and find us. We don't do no running around after *him.* I don't see what he can do to hurt us, anyhow."

Already Salter had recovered something of his accustomed optimism. He had come vaguely to believe that Jean would not wish them to allow thought of the past to unnerve their resolution. She would wish them to face the future unafraid, unhindered by useless regret for herself. Unselfishness had been the keynote of the girl's pitifully short existence.

This conclusion had cheered Salter amazingly. Having plumbed the depths of despondency he began now to yield to the promptings of his newly awakened courage. The result was a curious commingling of trepidation and confidence.

At the news of Frame's approach Sollum also had risen to his feet. His dried-up face held a ludicrous expression of resolve. He was about to move away when Judney interposed.

" Ain't trying to run away from Slum, eh, Joe ? "

The grin which accompanied the words stirred the little man to angry rejoinder.

" Me run away ? Why, you tea-swilling slab, I don't run from nobody ; and you ought to know that. Leggo my arm."

"I can tell by your face they's some dashed silly notion at the back of your head," pursued his friend, unabashed. "Where you going, I say?"

"Sticky beak," said Sollum sourly. "I'm going along to the barn for the old shotgun, if you want to know. She needs cleaning now and again, same as you do. Now you leggo before I dot you one."

Judney's only reply was to yank the little man suddenly from his feet and deposit him none too gently on the hard boards of the verandah. Having done this he remained standing alongside in the attitude of a guardian.

"I reckon Bill Hardie would have spanked the stuffing out of you for spouting such foolishness," he rumbled wrathfully into Sollum's unwilling ear. "Do you want us with murder on our hands? Now you jess kick my shins again and see what happens. And hush up that langwidge, won't you? Don't you see they's the ladies coming."

Mrs. Salter and the two girls had appeared round the side of the house. Seeing the approaching men they were about to retrace their steps when the stout man called to them:

"Come right over and set down with the rest of us, mother. Now, that's the idea. Jess as if we were going to have a group photo. Yes, that's you head wolf. That's Frame, that is. If they's anything doing you might as well hear it as the rest of us."

He added after a moment: "Ever see Frame before, Sadie?"

The girl shook her head without speaking. The events of the past few weeks had left their mark upon her. Her old expression of reckless good-nature had vanished utterly. There was something infinitely sad in the pinched face and drooping body. In her wide-open eyes lurked the shadow of a great horror, as if her mind dwelt continually on the tortured memory which beset it.

"Well, then you ain't missed much," supplemented the stout man under his breath.

Frame had preceded his manager down the path. He walked with ponderous jauntiness, his hands in his pockets and a fresh-lit cigar at the corner of his mouth. If he remarked the absence of any greeting it did not appear to give him concern.

"Good evening, ladies. And this, of course, is Mr. Salter? Glad to find you at home." He looked suddenly at Heritage, as if to catch the young man by surprise, and a hard smile

came on his face. "And there's Jack, too, eh? Quite a little family party. Well, Jack, and how's the timber business? Coming up to expectations, eh? Tut—tut, man; no need to look annoyed. I did my best to warn you, you know. But you wouldn't listen to the old man."

"Who are you?" interjected Salter bluntly.

Frame gave him closer attention.

"A superfluous question surely. Don't you know?"

"I ain't good at guessing," said the stout man. "Supposing you tell me?"

Some quality in the drawling voice appeared to impress the timber man unpleasantly. His brows came together in a frown.

"So. I'm Sam Frame."

Salter gave a little sigh.

"Jess so. Of course I knew that."

"Then why ask?" inquired Frame sharply.

The stout man looked him up and down with frank dislike.

"I reckon I jess wanted to see if you had gall enough to admit it. I see you have."

Judney broke into a rumble of mirth. He met Frame's quick stare with a grin of easy contempt.

"Know me again if you see me?" he asked impudently.

"I shall know you again all right," said Frame grimly. He turned to the silent Garraway. "Slum, who's that man?"

"That's George Judney. You remember I told you about him," said the manager uneasily. Peggy Adaire who had been steadily observing him (though for what reason she could not herself have told) gained a quite ridiculous impression that Garraway was somehow ashamed of the part he was being called to play. "He's a . . . a fairly tough customer. He threatened to knife me once. I wrote you about that. That's why I sacked him."

"Oh . . . that?" said Frame, as if suddenly recollecting.

What more he might have said was cut short by the shrill voice of Sollum Joe.

"George . . . George, I won't have it! D'you hear? You ain't to talk any more. Have a heart, George."

"Why ain't I to talk?" demanded the lank hutkeeper in genuine surprise.

"Because the gen'lemen from the city don't like it," said Sollum rapidly. "They ain't used to your rough ways.

You get on their nerves. You're a bad egg. You stick knives into people. They's a right way and a wrong way of letting folks know you don't like 'em. You got the wrong way. The right way is to grab his belongings when he ain't looking, or hold up his railway trucks, or maybe set fire to the bush and smoke him out. Your ways is coarse and vulgar. I'm kind of disappointed in you, George. Try and become a gent with a red face and see how your banking account will swell up till it near busts."

Quite suddenly Frame realised that these men were deliberately setting themselves to bait him. These ignorant bush-dwellers whom he had supposed at the last extremity of their courage, whose future he held in the hollow of his hand, did they but know it, refused to admit defeat; were actually laughing at him to his face, taunting him, defying him, as it might be, to do his worst. The timber man's cheeks went purple.

"That's enough of that," he almost shouted. "I came here to make you a fair enough proposition—one that behaviour certainly does not entitle you to. What had I in mind still holds, but it will be final now. I'll consider no alternative. So much for the impudent way you've met me. Now listen to the truth. You're down to bedrock, the lot of you. You've no stock, and mighty little credit. You're down and out, whether you know it or not. And I'm glad of it. Now what are you going to do?"

"That's our business!" retorted Heritage.

Frame eyed him queerly.

"You think so, do you? I'll do my best to make you understand that it's a good deal mine too. Once more, how are you going to carry on? How are you going to . . . but, pshaw! I don't expect any answer to that. You can't carry on. You haven't enough credit to run a fruit barrow on the streets. You're under contract to deliver staves you haven't got—and haven't the ghost of a chance to get. It would take five thousand pounds to prop you up. Where are you going to get it from? You can't get it! You surely don't imagine the Vilmy Company is going to nurse the baby while you play the fool through eternity, do you?"

"What do you know about the Vilmy Company, Mr. Frame?" asked Heritage quickly. In spite of himself he was startled.

"I know this much, that they ain't in business for the good

of their health. And they don't make a practice of alms-giving. Those that fall off the ladder must pick themselves up."

"That's the meanest thing I ever heard a man say," broke in Mrs. Salter unexpectedly. The old lady was on her feet, her careworn face tinged with angry pink. She shook a finger at the timber man. "Mr. Frame, did you ever trouble to think what success might mean for others? We've all a right to be happy—to have our share of the good things of life. It's not hard work that gets them, God knows! They's more money in an ounce of shady work than in all the toil an honest fool ever did. I ain't admitting we've failed even now. But if we have, we've failed cleanly and honestly. The only charity we ever asked was the charity of fair play. And that we've never had."

"There's no sentiment in business," said Frame uncomfortably. "I don't want to be rude, but I prefer to discuss this matter with your husband."

But the old lady continued to look at him steadily.

"Oh, shame on you, Mr. Frame. You . . . with your high living and comfort and sneering dislike of every decent thing. It is you and your kind that make life so hard for the rest of us. You would deny us the right to live. You would . . . " Mrs. Salter's attitude changed abruptly. Her composure seemed suddenly to desert her. Her mouth trembled and tears came into her eyes. She turned to her husband, all her pent up bitterness finding expression in a smothered cry:

"My girl . . . my Jeannie . . . "

"There—there, mother," said the stout man huskily. He began clumsily to pat her arm but she passed him by and went into the house.

Frame turned back to Heritage with a shrug of his shoulders. "I said the Vilmy Company won't carry you for ever. Well?"

"I never supposed they would," said the young man.

He was tormented by a foreboding of evil. How had Frame come so clearly to know of their relations with the Vilmy people? Why did he choose to speak of them now?

"All the same, I think they will stick to us for awhile yet," he said slowly. "They won't turn us down without a chance; particularly since I've sent them a letter which explains everything. The Vilmy Company makes a point of

advertising its desire to help the small man. If you know anything of the company you must know that it is up against ring methods. And in any case they couldn't afford to drop us. It would mean a dead loss to them. This is only a temporary setback, nothing more. If you're trying to scare us that way, Mr. Frame, you can't do it."

"Is that so?" said Frame. He paused a second, deliberately flicking the ash from his cigar. His eyes were very cruel. "Is that so, Jack? Poor Jack. Tut—tut, and really now you mean to tell me you never knew I was behind the Vilmy people? Why, God damn it, man, I *am* the Vilmy Company. Ah . . . so at last you know where you stand! Well, I warned you."

Heritage went white.

"Oh, but that's a lie, Mr. Frame."

Frame's last vestige of tolerance vanished.

"Is it? Is it a lie? You young puppy! Is it a lie, Slum? Bah! . . . "

"It's true enough," said Garraway in a low voice. He gave his principal a look of dislike. "Yes, it's true enough."

But Heritage would not listen.

"It's a lie, I tell you. Charley . . . Peggy, it's a lie. It can't be true. How could it be true?"

But his voice carried no conviction. He was conscious that Charley Salter was looking at him, that they were all looking at him. He felt Peggy Adaire's hand on his arm, saw the trembling of her lips as she spoke to him; though what the words were he could not hear for the buzzing in his ears. If this thing were true? . . . but he couldn't bring himself to think of it. These people, these friends of his who had trusted him, who had taken his assurance that here, at least, his precautions had placed them beyond possibility of failure, these friends . . .

Salter was calling to him. To Heritage's amazement there was no accusation, no hint of bitterness, in the stout man's tones. On the contrary his voice was fraught with a magnificent courage.

"Jack, don't let it worry you. If it's a lie, well and good. If it ain't . . . then well and good likewise. You wasn't to know a single thing about it. It's just one more dirty trick of a dirty lot. A straight man ain't got a chance against a pack of wolves. But he can keep his hands clean. That's worth living for, ain't it? Let them do their worst. We don't climb down for anyone."

Frame whirled about.

"Climb down? What are you talking about? You won't get a chance to climb down. I should say not. You'll be pulled down. Lord . . . and to think I've had you where I wanted you from the very beginning. I guessed every thought you ever had; I knew every move you made." He turned back to Heritage. "When you and Colvin found the Vilmy Company you thought you were Christmas. You thought you had Sam Frame on the hook. I'll give James that much credit . . . he certainly played his part well. He's not the best man I've got, but good enough. The job was only a second rate one at the time."

Heritage looked at the timber man with burning eyes.

"Mr. Frame, on your own showing you've been a cheat and a blackguard. There's nothing smart about it. You're . . . "

Frame banged his hand on his knee.

"That's enough! That's enough from you! Don't you call me names. A pretty one to preach you are . . . with your cant and whine. You're one of the sort that crawl after the plums under cover of a psalm and never know yourself for the hypocrite you are. You'll pay the price now."

"As if we hadn't paid already," said Salter. He looked at the timber man with a trace of wistfulness, as if wondering how he could so lose sight of the truth. "The loss of time and labour and money—that's bad enough. But it ain't the worst. We've paid in other ways. Do you think even you could exact harder terms than we've already met. I tell you no! Beside the loss of my girl anything you could do to hurt me ain't worth considering. What do you say to that?"

Frame's rancour led him to overstep the mark. For a moment he lost sight of even the rudiments of decency.

"Why, that there will be one less of you to starve," he cried brutally.

"Oh! you . . . you . . . " began Salter in a furious voice, but got no further. To the surprise of everyone the protest was drowned by Garraway's big, booming tones. The manager's face had lost its sullen, hangdog look. He seemed suddenly to have arrived at a decision as momentous as it was unexpected. An immense disgust was apparent in his voice.

"By Jove! that's about my finish. Mr. Frame, that

was a rotten thing for you to say. I've carried out my orders as I got them, and I'm game to admit I've had my fingers in some dirty work. But I reckon I've touched the limit in this. Man to man is one thing. But when it comes to saying cheap things of a dead girl you can count me out of it. You couldn't have known Jean Salter! There wasn't a decent man on the coast that didn't like and respect her. And I'll own this much—in my heart I've always thought her the straightest, finest woman I ever knew. The man that could sneer like you did ain't a man at all; he's nothing but a damned cowardly hound!"

Garraway turned swiftly to Charley Salter, who was listening open-mouthed.

"Charley, I want you to know I'm sorry. We ain't been friends this long time, but I want to tell you that's all over now. I've done you some dirt. Forget it. I've learnt a lot this last week."

The stout man came at Garraway with outstretched hand. His little eyes were shining.

"Thank you, Slum. I reckon them words make it quits between us for all time. I'd like fine to be friends again. If the under dogs don't stick together it's a poor look out for the working man. I always knew they was a big streak of the white man in you for all you bumped us hard enough at times. Not that they's any way you can help undo the tangle now. It's too late for that. But I'm almighty glad you said what you did."

Frame had recovered from his amazement. His face was livid. For a moment it seemed that he contemplated striking Garraway.

"Yes . . . you're through all right. You never spoke a truer word, Garraway. You've drawn your last money from me. You're sacked. I'll have no man of mine cur enough to bite the hand that feeds him. First Login, and now you. By the Lord Harry, there's a conspiracy in this! I begin to understand now how things went as they did."

"You get off this farm," snapped Salter. "You've said too much already! Get off my land!"

"I'll go when I'm ready," retorted Frame. "You'll have your own company soon enough. I wish you joy of it. Now listen to me. I came here prepared to make you an offer. If you'd been any way decent I was going to let you down light. I was going to give you a chance to meet the other

party on your broken contract. I was going to buy your leases from you. But now . . . I'll take them."

"Get out of here!" repeated the stout man ominously.

With deliberate contempt Frame turned his back. He threw out his arm, pointing towards the black mass of the timber line.

"I've more to say first. Over yonder is . . . is . . . My God, Sir . . . who are you?"

CHAPTER XXIV

ENDEAVOURING some time afterwards to reconstruct the scene for Colvin's benefit, Heritage was able to recall that the quick change in Frame's manner was almost grotesque in its suggestion of utter panic. For perhaps half a dozen seconds the timber man stood unmoving, transfixed, in an attitude which was the very embodiment of harsh, unyielding anger. His arm continued outstretched; his big close-cropped head remained thrust forward as he had lowered it in the final evidencing of his triumphant malice. And in the next breath his body seemed to crumple. His jaw dropped; his arm began to shake as if with palsy. Most curious of all, the big menacing voice faltered and broke to a kind of strangled whisper, as if an invisible cord tightened itself about his windpipe. The abrupt transition from one tone to the other had all the appositeness of melodrama; would, in fact, have sounded supremely ludicrous had it not been for the air of tragic sincerity which accompanied the words.

Between Frame and the gate stood Phil Adaire. So engrossed had they been that the old man's approach was unnoticed until that moment. His attitude presented a striking contrast to that of Frame. He stood erect, within a few feet of the cringing timber man, his frail figure poised with the eagerness of a beagle at the instant preceding the actual point. From his lips came a single name, uttered so shrilly as to drown even Peggy's glad cry of welcome.

"Clarkson?" he called. And then again, with a kind of startled emphasis, "Clarkson?"

Frame winced. He brought his arm to the level of his head in the manner of one anticipating a blow. They noticed as a curious fact that the scar on his neck seemed to stand out like the weal left by the lash of a whip.

"Phil Barkley, by God!" he said thickly.

Adaire's answering laugh was a revelation. The emotions

of a lifetime seemed crowded into a single, brief, unhumorous convulsion.

"Aye, Phil Barkley! But think of it . . . for twenty years I've hid the name in my coward heart; for twenty years I've gone in terror of honest men. I've been an outcast, a pariah of pariahs, obsessed by remembrance of a guilt that was never mine. What a sport of circumstance can a man become. And I thought I had killed you?"

Frame bared his teeth in a grin of sheer hate. The pendulum of his courage was on the upward swing. Such fear as he had known was moral rather than physical. He turned to face the others with a hoarse cry.

"You Salter . . . and you Heritage. I take all you people to witness that this man tried to murder me. Twenty years ago . . . does it matter how long. You've heard him confess it. See here . . . the scar on my neck. That's where he knifed me—my own knife, snatched from my belt—and left me for dead. As sure as there's law in the land he shall be made to answer for that . . . even after twenty years. I charge this man with attempted murder. Look at him. He dare not deny it."

Adaire was holding Peggy's hands tight pressed in his own. On his face was a transforming tenderness.

"I do not deny it." Adaire's voice became strident. He dropped his daughter's hands and took a single step forward. His weak eyes were suddenly blazing. "For that one thing you did neither time nor eternity can cancel. Let your own conscience declare which of us merits the greater condemnation. You threaten me with mans' law. But I charge you before the law of Almighty God which knows no corruption and endures beyond the grave itself. Dog and murderer . . ."

"Get out of my way" said Frame. He advanced threateningly. But his eyes retained their fear. He halted within a foot of Adaire's suddenly upraised hand. "Get out of my way."

The old man was trembling in every limb, but he did not budge. Such was the compelling earnestness of his gaze that Frame was frozen to inaction. Adaire threw out his hands as if in appeal. A torrent of words burst from him.

"Mr. Heritage, you've guessed from the first that I was the man you sought. Wait . . . don't speak yet. Yes, you knew, but you were puzzled. All my friends

knew in a vague way, but their loyalty held them silent. The poor, pitiful pretence went on day after day. Only Peggy has known and shared the fear at my heart. Poor child . . . I told her all the day I fled from you. That was a coward thing to do . . . to run away. But Login had told me . . ."

Frame opened his mouth to interrupt but Adaire turned on him with a shout.

"Silence! You . . . once my friend, the friend of Dick Moyes . . . to do a thing like that. Peggy, this man killed your mother. He made base love to her; and when she turned from him in scorn he plotted her destruction. One night when I was away from home he came to her with the news that I had been struck by a falling tree and lay at the point of death. I was asking for her. And he . . . had come to fetch her to me. That was what he told her."

The face of the big timber man was purple. He swung about in a kind of desperation.

"You lie," he snarled.

"I speak the truth," said Adaire shrilly. He put out his thin hands and thrust Frame from him. "My God, to think of it. You to stand there unmoved from your vile purpose . . . watching the despair in her eyes as she fought her fear . . . hugging the lie to your heart even while you listened to her broken thanks for your offer to take her to me . . . Clarkson . . . you devil. Wait, I *will* speak. Miles from home you told her the truth. You taunted her. She was trapped at last. But no . . . the realization drove her mad. As well might you have tried to reason with the night itself. Her one thought was to reach her home . . . to go back to her sleeping child. And in the end you had to let her go. You left her there by the road-side and drove away in a fury of unfulfilled desire. And she . . . God help her, stumbling home through the blackness, drenched to the bone, shaking from terror and weariness . . . It was so I found her . . ."

But Peggy could stand the strain no longer. She caught at the old man in an ecstasy of love and grief. For a moment the onlookers were forgotten. Husband and daughter clung together in terror while the years rolled back on the bitter tragedy of the past.

"Daddy . . . don't torture yourself like this. Don't

speak of it any more. How you must have loved her . . . my mother."

Adaire looked at her pitifully.

"But I must. That night's exposure killed her. And when she died I went mad. I sought out this man to kill him as he had killed Lucy. I found him alone and sprang at him with my bare hands. But he threw me off; laughing at me, taunting at my weakness. Only when I cried out to him that Lucy was dead did he give me the chance I lusted. He hadn't known things were as bad as that. His nerve left him for just a second. It was then I snatched the knife from his belt and struck. I left him for dead. And that night I fled and buried myself here in the bush. For twenty years I knew the torment of Cain. And when it seemed my sin had found me out I fled a second time. But only for a time, thank God. When I heard how you were suffering, how Jean had died, how Pete was hunted by the police, I could stay away no longer. I saw my action in its true light. I could be coward no longer. And so I came back to face the future side by side with those that love me. Who wants Phil Barkley need seek him no further."

"Is this true?" cried Salter. He was eyeing Frame with the utmost loathing. "Is this true, Mr. Frame? But of course it is."

"It is *not*," said Frame hoarsely. "It's a tissue of lies."

But once again Adaire cut him short.

"Frame! . . . Clarkson! . . . are you Frame then? You too changed your name. You were afraid—as I was afraid. But for a different reason. Well, you might fear what Dick Moyes would do when he heard of your treason. Dick Moyes, the truest, whitest friend I ever had. I wonder where he is now."

"Moyes is dead," said Frame brutally.

"Dead? Dick Moyes dead?" At the moment of realization Adaire's anger left him suddenly. He put his hand to his eyes. "Is it so then? My friend . . . honourable and true; who loved Lucy as dearly as I, if that were possible; yet who chose to leave us for ever rather than strain our thirty years of splendid comradeship. Oh, Sam . . . Sam—that I might have said that of you!"

But the timber man took no notice of the appeal. He shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

"Bah! Get out of my way. I can't stop here all day."

Adaire shook his head with a flash of his old resentment. "Your name you could change; but your nature, never. So it's you we've been fighting this long time. Surely some intuition might have warned me. The mark of the beast will be on you till you die."

"Out of my way," reiterated Frame thickly. "So you too are in this timber farce? Good—I'll break you now like a rotten twig. I'll send you howling from the island with the rest of them."

"You can't hurt me now," said the old man with quiet contempt.

"I can't? There's something still for you to hear. These others know it. Look at them. D'you know what I stand for? I'm the Vilmy Company. I've got you neck and crop. You're in debt to me—Sam Frame or Sam Clarkson, whichever you like. Now then, let me pass!"

"Stop a moment Mr. Frame," said Peggy. Her voice shook with excitement. "What if we can find the money after all? Yes, and a dozen times over, if need be. It was surely God's Providence you came here when you did so that my father could recognise you. He returns a rich man. Do you hear that, Mr. Frame? A rich man. All your malice cannot harm him. And what we have is our friends' also. We shall fight you now until we win. And Pete? Let them find Pete if they can. The best help, the best lawyers money can buy, shall be his. Jack . . . " With shining eyes she turned to Heritage. "Jack, tell him—tell them all of Captain Moyes. He died a rich man. And every penny of his money goes to my father."

Frame's face was a study.

"Moyes left his money to charity," he cried.

"He did not," snapped Heritage. "He left it to Phil Barkley his old friend. Yes, it's true. Oh, Mr. Frame, what have you lost? You might have been generous. The opportunity was yours. You might have redeemed everything of the past. You had us broken and dispirited. But God will not suffer your wickedness any longer. Peggy . . . was this the reason then? How blind I was! Was it for this then that you spoke as you did that night?"

Before them all she held out her arms to him.

"You know it was. Jack . . . would you let your pride part us now. This money is the least thing in my life. Can you forgive the sorrow I gave you . . . ?"

Alone of them all Sadie Williams did not wait to witness

Frame's discomfiture. Already she was walking quickly down the track leading to Grey Lagoon. At the turn-off to Berrigan's Gum she hurried past with a shudder, not pausing until she found herself at Jean Salter's grave beside the quiet waters. A little cry escaped her then.

"Jeannie . . . Jeannie, how glad you would have been. Why was you taken like that? They could have spared me so easily. And I wanted to die. And now . . . I must live. I must fill your place. Not in their hearts—that could never be—but in their lives to care and tend for them. So kind they are . . . "

She threw herself face downwards in the long grass, her body suddenly convulsed. How long she remained thus she did not know. A voice roused her. She looked up and saw Pete Diamond standing beside her in the twilight. Over against the fence stood his horse, with Pup watching beside.

"Why, Sadie, is it you?" said the cattleman. His black eyes searched her face, all swollen with crying. His own lip trembled. "You all loved her, you people. There, don't look so scared. They ain't caught me yet, and never will. I know jess where the police are. And Pup would give me warning before they got within a mile of here. I jess come along to say goodbye to Jeannie. I'm going to try for the mainland. Maybe I'll come back one day. If not . . ." he shrugged his shoulders. "Tell me about the rest of you."

The news of Frame's discomfiture brought a ring of pleasure to his voice.

"That's great, that is. And old Phil was Barkley after all. I reckon I guessed it though. But they didn't seem any sense in saying so while the old man held his tongue. And now they're to be rich. God bless Peggy, she was always Jeannie's friend and mine."

"Ain't I your friend?" said Sadie chokingly.

Pete smiled gravely.

"I never doubted it, old girl. Sadie, did you know Login was gone? They tell me he left on foot this afternoon for the west coast. Why, Sadie . . . you ain't caring for that? Ain't it the best that could happen? You don't care?"

She gripped his arm almost fiercely.

"Pete . . . is that true? that Login's gone. Thank God if it is! You'll think it strange for me be saying such things. You knowing what . . what happened . . "

"Steady, Sadie. Yes, he's gone right enough. They tell me he left the old camp about three. D'you know at

first I had a mind to go after him and fetch him back. I'd do it if I thought you wanted him back. But you don't. You ain't caring any longer ? "

" Caring ? If you only knew how glad I am. Ain't they been harm enough already that I should want him back. Weren't it him that brought most all of our troubles ? It were Login that sent Phil Adaire away from us, that tried to harm Peggy as he done me. It were him that killed Jeannie . . . " But next second she could have bitten her tongue off. " No—no. Pete . . . don't listen. I don't know what I'm saying."

" Yes, you do, Sadie—you do. Login that killed Jeannie ? By God, yes you do ! Out with it ! "

" Pete," cried the girl appealingly.

But the cattleman would not listen. Already the old-time madness was working in his face.

" Don't lie to me. You've known all the time it was Login ! Why did he do it ? Quick . . . I could strangle you for your slowness ! "

" If you done that I'd thank you," said Sadie. For a second longer she hesitated. Then her long brooding, her sickness of mind and body, culminated in an hysterical outpouring of the bitterness which consumed her. She faced him panting.

" I hate him . . . I hate him ! Yes, it was Login ! But he didn't mean it for her. It was me he aimed to kill. Is they need to ask why. Must I talk of *that* ? They was a parson staying over-night at the Ferry. I come up to tell Tom, and he said if I'd meet him at the big gum we'd talk it over and maybe he'd do what I wanted. I didn't want to go. They was something in the way he spoke that frightened me. Twice before that he'd asked me to meet him there, but somehow I was scared to go. I didn't trust him. Only this time he sort of made it a condition . . . And Jeannie *would* come. She was wearing a white dress like me. They was nothing to let him know . . . Pete, for God Almighty's sake come back. They's murder in your eyes."

But the big fellow was already mounting his horse. He struck so cruelly with the spur that the startled animal shot down the track like an arrow from the bow. After them went the shrill, frightened cry of the red-haired girl :

" Pete . . . come back ! It was lies I was telling you. They ain't nothing to it ! Think what you're doing . . . for Jeannie's sake ! "

Judney and Sollum Joe were yarning together outside the barn when the cattleman rode suddenly up to them out of the gloom. Without a word of greeting he dismounted and catching Pup by the collar led the dog to Judney.

"Mind the old dog for me, George, will you, till I get back? If I never do—and God knows it's on the cards—give him to Sadie Williams. I reckon Jeannie would like it that way. Joe, lend me your shotgun."

"I will, Pete, I will!" said the little man hurredly. Something in his friend's voice warned him not to question. He ran inside for the weapon.

Judney laid a hand on Pete's arm.

"It's the police, eh? They're after you? Ain't that so? Ain't they something we can do till Peggy gets to hiring her lawyer? Pete . . . old man. It'll come all right."

Pete looked at the old man gratefully.

"It ain't the police, George. Listen . . . I know now who felled Berrigan's Gum that night. It was Tom Login! Sadie let it out, not meaning to. It was Login hurt Sadie. It was him killed Jeannie. It was him sent the police after me with his lying tongue. That much I could have passed by. But not this other. I'll get Login now if I have to chase him over God's creation. He daren't tackle Pung's Crossing in the dark. I can head him off there. And if he's got his rifle with him, Joe's old gun will even things a bit between us. Be kind to the dog."

He snatched the shotgun from Sollum and rode swiftly off, heading for the filament of moon that hung above the crest of the far-off hills. In a few seconds the clatter of hoofs was swallowed up in the silence of night.

With great patience Judney coaxed Pup to a corner of the barn and made him fast with a length of cord. Quite unaccountably the dog showed every sign of uneasiness. He refused food and water. Now and then he whined softly.

Something of the animal's reluctance to rest apparently communicated itself to the two men. They sat silently smoking by the light of a candle stuck on the end of Sollum's bunk. At infrequent intervals one or other would rise and peer out into the chill night; afterwards resuming his seat with a half-ashamed glance at his companion. No word passed between them.

As the long hours passed the dog's uneasiness increased. He broke into a series of low, quick barks, tearing at the earthen floor of the barn with his fore-paws. His eyes

gleamed like live coals in the shadows. When Sollum rose to consult the tin clock hanging from a nail on the wall the dog strained on his rope in a kind of frenzy. There was something uncanny in the eager turn of his head as he watched the man's every movement.

" What's the time ? " asked Judney in a low voice.

Sollum looked at his friend queerly.

"Nigh three o'clock, George. We've most sat the night through. Jess two old fools, I reckon. And yet I don't know. Look at Pup. What's the matter with him ? What's the matter with any of us ? "

The dog seemed to be losing his wits. A strangled snarl escaped him. He began to tear and snap at vacancy.

Judney rose stiffly to his feet. His face was very sober.

" I feel like that myself. Joe, I'm feared for Pete. We never should have let him go by himself. You know what sort of man Login is—jess a wild beast man. Maybe I'm foolish, but my mind ain't easy. They's something in the air that seems all wrong. The dog there knows it—we know it, both of us. We can't jess sit on like this . . . doing nothing."

" No," said Sollum simply.

The two men looked at each other.

" It ain't right for so much trouble to hit one man," said the lank hutkeeper slowly. " Joe, we better get after Pete. I got a feeling he's needing his friends mighty bad. And Jeannie would be looking to us to help. That's so, ain't it ? "

Without waiting an answer he crossed over to Pup, now spinning wildly at the end of the rope.

" Open the door, Joe."

In silence the little man complied.

" Find him, Pup," said Judney huskily.

As he slipped the leash from around the dog's neck a lean tongue rasped his hand gratefully. The animal's trembling limbs bunched themselves, the lithe body swung back and settled. Next moment Pup sprang through the doorway and vanished in the darkness. They heard the sharp scurry of his flying pads. Then quietness once more.

" They'll be a frost, I'm thinking," muttered Judney, irrelevantly.

Sollum did not answer. He seemed to be having trouble with the buttons of his bluey overcoat.

They closed the door of the barn behind them.

CHAPTER XXV

PETE DIAMOND lay on his face in the reeds and silver grass that fringed the high banks overlooking Pung's Crossing. A mile back he had turned loose his horse and planted his saddle in a clump of dwarf honeysuckle. He did this last automatically, as if scarcely perceiving the motive which prompted the action.

The cattleman was tired to the point of exhaustion. He lay supine, scarcely moving except to strain his eyes towards the east where a dull red stain heralded the dawn. In his ears was the rythmical thud of waves combing the beaches beneath. Already the troubled water was brightening where the white crest of the breakers spun through the drifting gloom. The air, tinged with an almost imperceptible odour of dew-wet bush, stroked his face with ceaseless fingers of rime. The first frost of autumn had descended overnight upon the shrinking coastlands—black frost, invisible, alertly penetrating, laden with elemental threat.

In spite of his exposure Pete was only faintly aware of the cold. A fever of rage burnt in his veins, his whole body was glowing towards the accomplishment of a set purpose. Long since he had given over any attempt at settled reasoning. The old perplexities once again obscured his mental vision. The tired mind no longer cared to struggle for its half understood idealism. His whole outlook on life had suddenly become intensely, harshly practical. The lust to revenge clouded his reason like a fog, drawing him deep into the unplumbed savagery of his nature, threatening to part him for ever from that phase of his existence which now assailed his consciousness but vaguely—as the nearly forgotten imaginings of some beautiful, transitory dream. Once again he found himself face to face with the enigma of creation, the everlasting problem of the why and wherefore of all things.

As the darkness eased the yellow-white gleam of the shifting sands grew faintly discernible. He was able to distinguish the film of oily water stretching from side to side

of the crossing. From the level of the shore the banks climbed abruptly inland, rising to uneven mounds of drift-dirt and broken shell stained by the evil discoloration of spray from the quicksands below. The only sign of herbage was a grey weed spreading like a leprosy about the maw of the crossing itself. Elsewhere the growing light gave back only the dull reflection of salt-soaked barrenness.

Pete had chosen his position well. Situated as he was midway along the narrow tongue of rock that split the sands with a fibre of solid footway, he dominated the one approach to the high ground beyond. Unless Login deliberately chose to make a detour of eight or ten miles around the head of the swamps he must inevitably approach this spot.

Little by little the mists of dawn lifted. Day broke to a chill zephyr of wind from off the sea. For some time, however, the drab depression of sea and sky remained unsoftened. Only the east forecasted the perfect morning hidden behind the close banked clouds. There the horizon burned in a glory of tender radiance that cast streamers of amethyst and rose athwart the purple mantle of the fleeing night. The wonder of it would not be denied to even the morbidly engrossed imagination of the cattleman. For a moment he felt himself irresistibly drawn from the well of depression into which he was sinking. In his heart the charity of faith and comfort awakened to new impulse. Memory became a mirror reflecting only the verities of existence. In the radiant splendour of the dawn he once again viewed hope without blemish, courage without illusion. He knew himself witness of the transforming tenderness of Infinite Benevolence.

Only for a few seconds the sky held its glory. As if by magic the colours faded ; the cloud bank thickened and spread slowly upwards to the zenith ; the air chilled anew. From the long shadows of the knolls came the complaining grunt of a badger.

Once again Pete lay relaxed upon the grass, Sollum's old shotgun ready to his hand. But now, strangely enough, the proximity of the weapon seemed to trouble him. He looked at it distrustfully, putting out a hand to touch the chilled barrels. Somewhere at the back of his mind a memory was stirring. Words came to the tip of his tongue but escaped at the very moment of utterance. His tired mind seemed unable to focus the thought. In an effort to recollect, Pete

rose to his knees, fiercely impatient. As he did so his eyes fell on the figure of a man who picked his way cautiously along the sands towards the rib track of the crossing.

Even as he recognised Login and sank swiftly back into hiding the cattleman knew no cessation of the struggle within his mind. Still his brain sought and sought for the memory that would not come. Dominating even the thrill of savage joy which swept him at sight of his enemy was this insistent, terrible prompting from out of the past. Pete's eyes went to the shotgun, then back to the approaching man. His brows puckered.

And then suddenly he understood. By, God knows, what miracle of re-creation or ecstasy of illusion there came to his ears the beloved echoes of Jean Salter's voice, beseeching, pleading, exhorting . . . piercing the very depths of his being with its eager confident tones :

" Clean hands . . . clean hands ! Oh, Boy, as if anything else could really matter. Always clean hands . . . and let God judge the end . . ."

He rose once more to his knees, gripping the shotgun by the end of the barrels. He raised the weapon above his head, swung, and released his hold. Exulting he watched the dull brown of its passing, saw it strike the surface of the quicksands. Then it was gone. But gone too was th terror of loneliness which had obsessed him. He felt himself to be no longer alone. In some extraordinary manner the spirit of the dead girl enveloped his consciousness like a cloak . . . shielding, comforting, clearing his brain of its madness. He stood upright, six feet of splendid manhood his face rugged, strong, passionate as ever, but now alight with divine understanding. For a single instant his gaze swept over the dawning prospect of land and sea. Behind him, to one side of him—God alone knew just where—rode the searching police. Before him was his escaping enemy. Unarmed he stepped from behind his cover.

Login was already almost halfway over the crossing. At the sudden, unexpected appearance of the cattleman he came to an abrupt halt, his eyes widening in angry amazement. By accident or design he lowered the rifle from his shoulder in such a manner as to cover the man before him.

Pete was smiling grimly.

" So. I suppose you know why I'm here, Tom ? "

" Maybe I do. And then again, maybe I don't," said

Login. For the moment he seemed dumbfounded. "I don't know that I care one way or the other."

"I reckon we'll have a little talk," continued Pete, after a second's pause.

"Not me," said the ex-section boss. "See here, I'm in a hurry. I'm due at Sandy Bay by mid-day. You knew I was leaving, anyhow. This end of the coast, and the folks on it, have about got on my nerves. They's been too much damned psalm singing for my liking. The mines are good enough for me."

"You'll never see the mines," said Pete slowly.

For a minute the men measured glances. Login's gums drew back in a feral grin.

"You don't say? Who'll stop me?"

"I will," said the cattleman. "You're going back with me to The Bend. You know why!"

Login was peering from side to side.

"You tell me, Pete."

"I'm going to. It's because you've about reached your limit. All my life I seem to have waited for this day. A half-hour ago I had it in my mind to kill you. Maybe you'll hang even yet. As it is I'm going to take you fair and hand you over to them that know how to deal with your sort. It ain't for what you've done to me either. The lies you've told, the dirt you've played me—it ain't that that counts. I could have passed that by; even what you aimed to do that night at Elbow Ridge. I'm going to make you face out now because of what you done to Sadie Williams, and because it was you that . . . killed Jeannie."

For an instant Login's composure deserted him.

"How did you know that? By God, I understand you now! But you're wrong, anyhow. It was an accident, Pete. I swear I never aimed to hurt your girl. I never meant it for her."

"Men like you ain't fit to live," said Pete tonelessly. "You can say what you like, but I reckon I'll take you back."

"I say no," said Login watchfully.

"But you'll go jess the same. I know it and you know it. If they's justice on earth you're going back to get what's coming to you. They's no get-away for you this side of the grave."

"Why, you fool, they'll get you too, won't they," said

Login. He looked at Pete contemptuously, as if marvelling at the big fellow's little wit. "You'll be putting yourself away. Think again."

"So long as you're there beside me it'll be all right," said Pete. "I reckon you'll come."

"I say no," repeated Login. He licked his lips, tapping the stock of his rifle with his fingers. "And this says no, too. Now what are you going to do?"

A little silence fell. Each man knew now that the other meant exactly what he said. Pete understood perfectly that if he did not move aside when Login called he would be shot down with as little compunction as though he were a dog. The shifting sands would mask all evidence of the crime.

For all that the cattleman remained unafraid.

"Put that gun down," he said quietly.

"You can't say I never warned you," replied Login from between his teeth.

For just a second longer Pete hesitated. Was this to be the end then? And quite suddenly he knew that it was. The odds against him were too great. By casting away Sollum's shotgun he had deliberately thrown away this one chance of meeting this man on anything like even terms.

Very slowly—almost longingly—his eyes travelled the wide sweep of well-remembered coastlands. Already the first beams of sunshine danced and flickered along the crests of the knolls. The green comeliness of the hills beckoned alluringly out of the far distance. His mind's eye followed them inland over ridge and gully-bed, on and on to the quiet prospect of sheltered plain where dwelt his friends. Even now perhaps they were thinking of him—Charley Salter, the Adaires, those queer old mates and faithful friends, George Judney and Sollum. And Heritage? Yes, he had always liked Jack Heritage. And maybe—nay, he knew—he would never see any of them again. Yet he did not regret. Thought of their security made him rejoice to the bottom of his big, unselfish heart. They, at least, were freed for a time from the insatiate greed, the cold malice of the timber wolves. Most of the lands of The Bend would now remain in the hands of those that understood their rugged nature, that loved the spirit of the woods almost as some sentient thing; that wrought amid their fastnesses not for gain alone but of

necessity and right, for the upholding of a principle, the vindication of a creed.

Far up on the side of the knolls the currant bushes swayed and tossed as if to the passage of some swift intruder. A lithe body momentarily flashed into view against the emerald green of a grass pocket set in a rift of living bush. But the cattleman was all unconscious of its passing. He had turned again to face his enemy.

" Tom, they's no dodging the thing that's got to be. I'm going to take you back—if I can. You ain't never known me to break my word, whatever else. And that's my word now. You're going back to answer to the full for what you done jess as surely as the dawn is coming over the sea. You may shoot, but I don't reckon it can matter much. They's a greater than me is taking a hand in this game. Man, you can't bluff Almighty God.

He moved forward, his hands outstretched.

" Keep back," cried Login in a panic.

" No," said Pete simply.

Without another word Login fired. That instant saw the consummation of his wickedness.

" You damned fool . . you would have it," he muttered crazily. " I reckon I told no lie."

Even as he lowered his weapon to peer at the fallen man a form dropped like a flash of light from the ridge above. Something that looked like a copper streak hurled itself at him, white teeth fastened themselves in his throat, stifling the terrified scream that rose to his lips. The great body of the kangaroo dog clung snarling about Login's shoulders, weighing him down, tearing at him with maddened forepaws. He staggered backwards, his feet feeling wildly for solid ground. Then man and beast fell from the pathway into the yawning maw of the sands.

Pup alighted uppermost, but too late to save himself. The slime engulfed his body to the haunches, sucking him deeper at every breath. With a desperate effort the dog balanced himself upon the threshing, suffocating body of the man below. And in that instant of life he gave tongue for the last time—a single note, mournful and despairing, yet with an echo of something almost human in its deep appealing cadence. He had met his enemy at last and conquered, and the faithful heart sought frantically to understand the absence of that quiet approving voice he loved so well.

The dying man above heard and tried to answer, but his strength was gone. His eyes opened, and the flicker of a smile came on his paling lips.

"Good old dog . . . Jeannie."

Five miles back two old men stumbled across the uneven plains, with anxious faces uplifted to the frosted dawn.

FINIS

Printed in Great Britain by W. & J. Mackay & Co., Ltd., Chatham.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY
Los Angeles
This book is DUE on the last date stamped below.

LD-URL
MAR 25 1988
FEB 29 1988
JAN 17 2006

20m-7,'67(H3149s4)

3 1158 01251 7693
05
824t
UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY
AA 000 372 375 6